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THE beautiful red-haired girl told Ferron he was a heel straight down the line.

But she'd do anything for him—anything at all.

Wayne would find out, too, that Ferron was part hoodlum, part gigolo, a guy who'd break your arm as quick as he'd look at you.

Yet Wayne wanted to give him a quarter of a million bucks.

And the police knew that Ferron was the most wanted man in the state.

But they did nothing about it. They didn't even look for him.

It was a swell setup, Ferron thought.

They'd never get him because he was too smart.

Maybe.

He began to wonder . . . *and then suddenly his whole world began to shatter with unspeakable savagery.*

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SLEEP

with.....

A LION ORIGINAL

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Day Keene

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270 Park Avenue
New York City

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Chapter One

HE WAS IN NO SPECIAL HURRY to kill Bennett. He would know when the right time came. It might be tomorrow; then again, this waiting might go on for months. At the moment, Ferron merely envied Whit Bennett. Right now Whit was probably sitting in some air conditioned bar, working on a tall cold Collins and a babe.

Ferron wished he was doing the same thing himself. Instead he was sweltering in the small frame church where the summer heat was a living, tangible substance. Night was a hot black blanket hung over the open windows. It seemed as if the sermon had been going on for hours. Ferron's cheap white shirt and shiny blue serge suit were sodden with perspiration. He was glad there were no screens on the windows. The drone of the mosquitoes attracted by the flickering oil lamps and the constant *slap, slap, slap* of the congregation were all that was keeping him awake. He'd never been so bored or so uncomfortable. Still, considering the score for which he was shooting, he could stand some discomfort. He could wait.

A big blond man in his early thirties, Ferron decided he could be as patient as the situation required. Now he looked across the center aisle that separated the men from the women. He watched Amy. He wished things were different regarding Amy. It would make the waiting less boring.

Dewy was the word that best described her. Dewy, virginal, untouched. Her face was elfin. Crisp black curls peeked out from under the modest poke bonnet she habitually wore. Not even her simple gray gown could disguise the perfection of her form. There was a hidden devil in her gray-green

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eyes. She was a smouldering volcano, as yet unawakened, awaiting the touch of the master's hand. Ferron slapped at a mosquito. And she was his, but only on one condition. He studied the earnest young face, then dropped his eyes to the snug fit of the girl's bodice and perspired even more profusely.

In the six months he'd courted Amy, the greatest intimacy she'd granted him had been a kiss, and that only after they had been formally engaged and the banns had been read from the pulpit. Now they kissed goodnight regularly. On occasion they even held hands. There would be nothing more until their wedding night. Ferron doubted if in her entire years the girl had even thought one improper thought. On the night she became his wife she would be his to do with as he pleased, a willing and eager participant in the Biblical injunction to beget. Until then, they could continue to hold hands.

Ferron patted at the perspiration on his face with his handkerchief. Still, biologically speaking, all women were very similar. And until he and Amy were married, there was always Lydia.

Ferron suppressed a smile as he thought of the red-haired night club singer. Lydia would howl if she could see him now. She'd ask:

"What the hell are you made up for, a Holy Joe or a Bible salesman or something?"

As usual, with her gamin-like perception, Lydia would be right.

Ferron glanced down at his shiny blue serge suit. The too tight coat bound his broad shoulders. The archaic, stiffly starched white collar was choking him. His black string tie had worked its way under one ear. It was an effort for him to cross his legs because of the heavy, thick soled shoes he was wearing.

More, his clothes and the pious attitude he assumed on

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his weekly visits to New Hope did something to his face. He didn't even look like Les Ferron. In New Hope, he wasn't Les Ferron. He was Paul Parrish, former rural school teacher, and current itinerant peddler of Bibles and religious objets d'art. It still surprised him how many of both he sold in the few days a month he was able to devote to this new identity he was building.

Ferron forced himself to listen to what the minister was saying. One thing was for sure. The guy was death on sin. Anyone who drank or smoked or played cards or desecrated the Sabbath in any way was hell bound for the hot place in a bucket. The thought amused Ferron. It was little wonder the small, obscure sect washed up into a fertile pocket in the foothills of the Catskills had so many children. There was nothing else for them to do.

He lifted his eyes to the open windows and the thick black night behind them. It seemed incredible that he was less than a hundred miles from the hurly-burly of Times Square, an hour and a half's drive in the 210-horsepower yellow convertible Cadillac garaged at the western terminus of the George Washington Bridge. Of course, in the ancient Plymouth he always drove to New Hope the drive took him a little longer. One night the heap of junk was going to fall to pieces under him. Still, it was in keeping with his role. Itinerant peddlers of Bibles didn't drive yellow Cadillacs.

He looked back at Amy and found her looking at him. She blushed and returned her attention to the preacher.

Like shooting a sitting quail, Ferron thought.

He studied the congregation. With the possible exception of young Swinton, they wouldn't give him any trouble. They liked him. They were a simple minded, honest folk who thought alike. Even their dress was uniform. The men wore shiny blue serge suits, white shirts, and wide-brimmed black felt hats. The women wore plain black or light gray dresses

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with bonnets to match, the younger and unmarried women adding a bit of white ruching to their bonnets.

The physical aspects of the community were in keeping. No main highway bisected it. There were several general stores, a bank, and a hotel of sorts, but there was no movie, no bar, no beauty shop, no pool room; there were no restaurants, no ice cream parlors. Few people traveling north or south on the broad modern highway along the Hudson River even knew that New Hope existed. It was still much as it must have been when Rip Van Winkle took his famous nap and the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow had galloped through the hills. Its main occupation was farming and, whatever it was that it had, the community had something. Its old stone houses were still solid and well kept. Its white painted barns were bursting with produce. Its green pastures were rich with cattle. Its one concession to modernity was its acceptance of trucks and tractors and cars. Every family in the group had one or more of each. More, they were good business men. All the New Hopers asked was a chance to sell their produce on an open market, and to be left alone.

Amy's father was sitting directly in front of Ferron. Ferron stared at the old man's thick red neck. Old man Wayne was worth at least a hundred thousand dollars in cash. His lake front farm, exclusive of the buildings, would bring three times that much if the old man could be persuaded to sell it to the summer resort syndicate that had bombarded him with offers for years.

Ferron was wryly amused. It was, in a way, funny to think of a rube having that much money while he, who had been a sharper all of his adult years, would be hard put to scrape a thousand dollars together. And to do that he would have to sell his fairly extensive wardrobe and the mortgaged yellow convertible to boot.

Ferron continued to be amused. True, on the day he and Amy were married, old man Wayne had promised to deed one

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of his farms to them. Not the lake farm, but a good working farm. Ferron wondered what the hell he would do with a farm. He didn't know one end of a cow from another. Milk came in paper cartons and corn in cans as far as he was concerned.

His active mind raced on. But the farm would be a start. With what he intended to get out of Whit Bennett's strong box on the day that he killed Whit, he'd have a firm foundation on which to build his new identity. Then, after a few months or years of enjoying Amy, once he'd worn the gloss off the apple, it would be easy to figure out some way to get his hands on the old man's money and take off for less grazed pastures. All in all, if only he was patient, he ought to realize better than a quarter of a million dollars.

Ferron sat sober faced, pretending to listen to the preacher. It was funny how things happened. A man played along for peanuts all his life. He played bit parts on radio, he was a professional model, he lived off old bags who should know better, and a few young ones like Lydia who did. He broke arms and legs and noses for a louse like Whit Bennett. Then blooey, he had it made, seven no trump, doubled and redoubled.

It was equally funny how he'd found New Hope. He certainly hadn't been looking for it. All he'd been looking for was a place to lie low for a few days in case Roberts' widow went to the police. That had been last February. He'd been driving a rented Ford, posing as a hunter, and had blundered into New Hope accidentally. He could still remember how cold and hungry he'd been. The hotel had taken him in but the ancient proprietor had suggested that he eat at the church social the women of the community were giving.

Ferron shook his head at the thought. He'd never seen so much food for four bits. The same meal at any half-way decent New York restaurant would have cost him twenty dollars. More important, he'd met Amy and, from force of

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habit, had asked to drive her home. And when her red-faced, square-bearded father, sprinkling his conversation liberally with thees and thous had asked him what he did for a living, what could he tell the man? That he was a part-time male model who posed for the lurid pictures in true crime magazines; that he was a bit radio actor and small time gigolo; that he broke arms and legs, and backs if necessary, to keep a nasty little loan shark's creditors in line? Of course not.

What he had told Wayne had been sheer inspiration. Ferron chuckled inwardly at the thought.

"Why, I'm a former rural school teacher," he'd told him, *"although I'm currently selling Bibles."*

The lie that made him the white haired boy from the start. That and the fact that because his father had been an itinerant street preacher, Ferron had heard it expounded so many times he knew the Bible better than most preachers. He could quote it from Genesis to Revelations and, during the last six months, had done so every time an occasion presented itself.

The rest had followed naturally. Amy had fallen in love with him. To her he was romance with a capital R, a man from the outside world she'd never seen, a young Joseph come to Egypt, David in search of an unmarried Bathsheba.

He'd learned old man Wayne had money. The widow Roberts hadn't gone to the police. And almost as if by divine —or more likely diabolical—revelation, he'd seen his way, at long last, to get away from Whit Bennett and make a good profit to boot.

Now, if he could only be patient, wait for the right moment to strike . . .

Ferron realized with a start that the minister had finished and was announcing the closing hymn. He rose with the

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rest of the congregation and shook his head, smiling, as his neighbor offered to share his hymnal.

"No, thank you," Ferron said smugly. "I know all the old songs by heart."

He spoke a little louder than usual, to make certain that old man Wayne heard him. He wanted Wayne to *want* him for a son-in-law, just in case he should have trouble with young Swinton.

Ferron looked for the burly young farmer. Swinton was glowering at him, as usual. Swinton had reason to hate his guts. Until he had shown on the scene, the prosperous young farmer had enjoyed an informal understanding with Amy. The oaf had hoped to marry her himself.

The hymn, *Bringing in the Sheaves,* was, Ferron thought, especially appropriate. He meant to bring in as many sheaves as possible. He sang in a lusty baritone, eyeing the tempting curves of Amy's slim young back. He had a lot to which to look forward. It was going to be a pleasure to follow the Biblical injunction to forsake all others and be fruitful with her.

Ferron smiled to himself as he sang. That was the nice thing about being a heel. A heel was the lowest thing in the human nervous system and, consequently, had no conscience.

Chapter Two

IT WAS AS HOT IN THE SMALL CHURCHYARD as it had been inside. Ferron stood in the dark, slapping at mosquitoes and making small conversation with the men around him while he waited for Amy.

Another Sunday was over. It was time for him to get on

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his horse. He would have to push on as soon as he had seen Amy home.

Young Swinton joined the group in which he was standing. "How's the Bible business?" he asked.

"Fine," Ferron assured him.

"I'll bet. I'll just bet," Swinton said.

Young Swinton started to say more and changed his mind as Amy and her father came out of the church. The bearded farmer transferred the small hand on his coat sleeve to Ferron's arm. There was a twinkle in his eyes when he spoke.

"I know thou are waiting for Amy, Paul. Eyah, I was young once myself. An excellent sermon, eh, son?"

Ferron patted the small hand on his arm. "An excellent sermon, sir. I enjoyed every word of it."

"You'll be going back to the Falls tonight?"

"Yes, sir," Ferron said. "As soon as I drive Amy home. I hope to start out early in the morning as I've quite a bit of ground to cover in the coming week."

Wayne nodded sagely. "Eyah. You're doing a good and a Godly work." He squeezed Ferron's arm. "But I'll be glad and I know Amy will when we have you with us always. Don't make it too far distant, Paul. I have enough of the world's goods for us all."

Ferron had a feeling of unreality as he watched the broad shouldered old man join another group of farmers discussing current crop prices and government regulations. The old fool meant what he said. Wayne liked him. Wayne trusted him.

The thought amused him as he walked Amy through the moist black heat to the leafy chestnut tree under which his pre-war model Plymouth was parked. He could marry Amy tomorrow and Wayne would set him up for life. Wayne would give him a farm, and a car, and money. He had enough of the world's goods for them all.

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For a moment Ferron was tempted. Life would be pleasant with Amy. It would be nice to relax, to stop figuring angles. On the other hand, what the hell would he do on a farm, especially a New Hope farm? Right now he wanted a drink and a smoke so bad his nerves were screaming. Besides he would never be safe, really safe, as long as Whit Bennett was alive.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," Amy said.

"Just thinking," Ferron told her as he helped her into the car.

"About us?"

"Yes. About us."

He started the ancient car and drove slowly through the hills toward the Wayne farm. It would be different once they were married, but as things were he always felt a little uncomfortable with Amy. He'd never known a girl like her before. He was always conscious of her innocence, afraid he would make a break that would startle or perhaps frighten her away before he closed the trap.

She rode with her left hand resting lightly on his thigh. "When are we going to be married, Paul?"

Ferron considered the question. "Soon."

"This summer?"

"Yes. Some time this summer."

"I'm glad," Amy said. "So glad." She patted the thigh on which her hand was resting. "If you only knew how much I love you, Paul, how much I want to be your wife."

Ferron wished she'd take her hand off his thigh. It was all he could do to keep from parking the car and taking her in his arms. But if he did, he knew what would happen. He wouldn't be able to restrain himself. Amy would be shamed and tearful and frightened. In the world in which she lived, good girls didn't do such things. And that would be the ball game. No. It was better to wait.

Ferron drove on doggedly. "I love you, too," he said.

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"And we'll be married soon. I may know just when when I come back next week."

"I'm glad," Amy said. "So glad."

Ferron turned down the moonlit and leaf-mottled lane that led to the Wayne farm. The lake was a vast sheet of silver ringed by the black silhouette of trees. As he braked the Plymouth in front of the farmhouse, a dog yapped, the cattle in the barnyard lowed, a sleepy squirrel awakened and began to scold.

His feeling of tension increased. He usually sat and talked to Amy for a half hour or longer. Tonight he was afraid to. He was afraid to trust himself.

"I'm sorry, but I think I'd better get right on to the Falls," he said. "Like I told your father at church, I'm going to have to start out early in the morning."

"Whatever you think best," Amy said.

Ferron walked around the car and helped the girl to the ground. For a moment their bodies touched, the feel of her setting him on fire; then Amy raised on her tiptoes and kissed him.

"Good night, Paul. Until next week. And God and my love go with you."

She kissed him again, her lips clinging a moment longer than was necessary. Then she was gone. Shaken, Ferron got back in his car and sat watching the dark farmhouse until an oil lamp flickered, then showed yellow in the parlor. Ferron made a mental correction. In the sitting room. The closed off parlor was never used except for weddings and funerals.

The soft black night closed in around the car. The dog stopped yapping and the cattle in the barnyard ceased to low. Some of Ferron's tension left him. He almost wished things could be different from the way they had to be. But they couldn't. He knew himself. He couldn't keep up this sanctimonious pose forever. He had to drink and smoke and

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bet on a horse and sit in on an occasional game of poker. The so-called false appetites of life were as much a part of his life as breathing. Then, too, no matter how dewy they might be the first time a man knew them, all women were basically the same. No one woman could content him for long. The black-haired girl was strictly secondary in the scheme of things to be.

He drove slowly back the way he had come. Maybe this would be the week he would kill Whit. Then Les Ferron would disappear. Paul Parrish would marry Amy, and after a few weeks or months or years, once he got his hands on the old man's property, both real and personal, Paul Parrish, too, would disappear. A man was what he was. That was one thing that couldn't be changed.

All of the cars were gone from the churchyard. The white frame church stood dark and deserted, its peaked steeple pointing at the moon. Ferron drove on slowly through the unlighted town, along the main street which would lead him to the main arterial highway along the Hudson River and the small town of Palisades Falls in which Paul Parrish maintained a room.

He wanted a drink. He wanted a smoke. But he wouldn't dare to drink or smoke until he was back in his own clothes, in his own car. A muddy Buick was parked on the approach to the bridge that led across the small river on the outskirts of New Hope. As Ferron approached the bridge, young Swinton stepped out into the headlights of the wheezing Plymouth and flagged him down.

"Don't bother to get out," he said. "I can say what I want to say in a few words."

Ferron leaned on the rolled-down window of his car, amused. "Yes—?"

The farmer was a worker, not a talker. Red faced in his earnestness, choosing his words carefully, he said, "I don't like you, Parrish. You're too good to be true. You got Amy

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and her father fooled. You got most everyone fooled but me. But I'm warning you right now, Parrish—"

"Yes—?" Ferron repeated.

Swinton gripped the metal sill with work-calloused fingers, not as certain of himself as he had been. "If I'm wrong, if you're really as good as you pretend to be, there's nothing I can do about it." His voice grew stronger. "But don't play high, wide, and handsome with Amy. Because if you do, I'll —"

"You'll what?" Ferron asked flatly.

The young farmer told him. "I'll beat your goddam head in and feed your rotten guts to my hogs."

Ferron pretended to be shocked. "Tch tch. Swearing. And on the Sabbath, too."

He let out his clutch and drove on. He was going to have trouble with Ira. He would have to keep his eyes on him. He would have to be careful to make no mistakes, at least until after he'd killed Whit and completely switched identities. Then young Swinton could go screw.

Ferron filled his lungs full of air. No one would be able to prove anything. His fingerprints, as Les Ferron, weren't on record. He'd taken good care to see to that. He let out the pent-up air in his lungs. And if the law or young Swinton wanted to backtrack on Paul Parrish, wanted to trace him to the midwest slum in which he had been born, they would find nothing incriminating. Parrish happened to be his right name. He had a birth certificate to prove it. And at one time in a distant and youthful and impoverished past, shortly before he'd gone into the Army, and the Army did have his fingerprints on record, he'd even taught a rural school for a few months.

This is a picture of a kitty. A kitty is a small cat. What does the kitty say? The kitty says meow.

The twenty miles to the Falls seemed endless without a cigarette. When Ferron reached the shabby house in which

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he maintained a room, his landlady was still awake and waiting up for him. A plump and motherly woman in her middle sixties, she was disappointed to learn he didn't intend to stay the night, that the only reason he had returned was to load his car with a new shipment of Bibles and religious art objects before taking off for upper, rural New York.

The old woman was concerned. "You're working too hard, Paul."

Ferron grinned at her, white-toothed. "I have to. It can be I'll be married next week."

Mrs. Harvey was pleased by the information, but saddened by the thought of losing a steady roomer who used his room so seldom. His car loaded, Ferron paid her a week's rent in advance, put the receipt in his wallet, then, still without a cigarette, drove north on the unlighted side street.

Safely out of sight of the house, he turned east toward the river, then south on U. S. 9W, his battered Plymouth one in the metal stream of cars filled with sunburned weekenders returning from the myriad resorts in the Catskills and along the Hudson.

Near the western terminus of the Bridge, with New York just across the river, he drove on the few miles to Fort Lee and into the double garage of the suburban home he'd rented for a year in advance.

The garage door locked behind him, he realized his entire body was trembling. The strain was beginning to tell. Each trip he made to New Hope and the transition back to Les Ferron was becoming exceedingly more nerve racking. He couldn't keep up the dual role much longer. He had to kill Whit this week, next week at the latest, and let Les Ferron disappear.

His hands shaking badly, he took a package of cigarettes from the glove compartment of the yellow Cadillac and sucked the smoke into his lungs. The harsh smoke tasted good.

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Gradually the trembling of his body ceased. The cigarette still in his mouth, he stripped off the sweaty blue suit and the cheap underwear beneath it and toweled the accumulated perspiration from his body. He looked at the stairs leading up into the house. He wished he dared to shower but he had never used the house for fear of leaving fingerprints or other telltale signs. You couldn't be too careful.

Nude except for his socks, he opened the leather traveling case in the trunk of the Cadillac and put on fresh underwear. The silk felt good on his body. He might as well enjoy it while he could. Paul Parrish would wear cheap cotton jockey shorts and undershirts, the two for a dollar kind, even on his wedding night.

He chose a pastel green silk sports shirt and a hand-painted yellow tie, then put on the pants to the natural color shantung suit for which he'd paid two hundred dollars. His expensive platinum wrist watch, a pair of black and white sport shoes, and a broad-brimmed planter's Panama followed.

Ferron could feel his face change with his clothes. The smugness left his lips. They felt fuller than they had. His lean jaw jutted familiarly. His blue eyes narrowed. His broad shoulders straightened to their full width.

He stopped being frightened and was amused. Water on them all. This same time next year he'd be in Bogotá or Rio or Buenos Aires, after a very pleasant few weeks or months with Amy. With a quarter of a million dollars in his pocket. Even thinking of the black-haired girl excited him. Amy would be the first virgin he had ever known.

The date of his departure would depend entirely on how hot Les Ferron was, and how long it took Paul Parrish to con old man Wayne.

Ferron folded the blue suit neatly and put it with the underclothes he'd discarded into a battered paper suitcase on the back seat of the ancient Plymouth. Then he locked

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the Plymouth securely and backed the yellow Cadillac out of the garage. He locked the garage behind him and drove rapidly back to the great bridge linking both banks of the Hudson.

It was good to be back in New York. He enjoyed the rush of traffic and the lights and the people. Even at two o'clock in the morning, on a Monday morning to boot, there were more people on the streets and walks than passed through New Hope in ten years.

Ferron debated driving directly to his own apartment, then decided to spend the rest of the night with Lydia. He stopped at a bar where he was known and drank two double ryes and picked up a fifth to take with him.

With whiskey roaring through his head, he felt almost normal again. He drove south on Riverside Drive, turned east on 82nd Street and handed the doorman of Lydia's apartment hotel the keys to the yellow Cadillac.

"I won't want it until morning, John."

The doorman palmed the five dollar bill Ferron had wrapped around his key case and touched the brim of his cap. "Yes, sir, Mr. Ferron."

Ferron swaggered across the walk, took the elevator to the eighth floor and rapped loudly on Lydia's door.

"Who is it?" she wanted to know.

"Who do you think?" Ferron asked.

The red-haired girl opened the door, fastening the sash of a white negligee. Her eyes were sullen with sleep and slightly puffed, as if she had been crying. "You can keep right on going, Les," she told him. "I don't want anything more to do with you." Her sullen eyes searched his face. "You've been with some other woman. I can tell it by your eyes."

Ferron slapped her out of his way. "Don't give me that crap." He closed and locked the door behind him, then set

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the fifth of rye on the coffee table. "Go get some ice and two glasses."

It was as hot in New York as it had been in New Hope. There was a still, breathless quality to the air in the apartment. Ferron took off his coat and loosened the knot in his tie. When he looked up, the red-haired girl was still standing in front of the bridge lamp. She had been sleeping in the altogether and, standing as she was, the sheer white negligee revealed almost as much as it concealed.

Lydia's eyes continued sullen. "I shouldn't," she said. "After you stood me up Friday night, and then again last night, I swore I'd never even speak to you again."

Ferron continued to stare at her, imagining she was Amy. His mouth felt suddenly dry. The pound of his pulse filled his ears.

The red-haired girl made up her mind. "Well, I'll have one drink with you, but that's all."

She started for the kitchenette. Ferron caught her by the shoulder and spun her back into his arms, his big, capable hands caressing her brutally, savagely. "To hell with the rye. It can wait."

The red-haired girl screamed in pain. "Stop, Les. Please. You're hurting me. What do you want?"

Ferron picked her up in his arms and carried her toward the open bedroom door. "Don't give me that. You know what I want."

Chapter Three

THE QUACKING OF DUCKS awakened Ferron. For a moment he was startled. He thought, what the hell? Then he remembered the lagoon just across Central Park West. At this time of year the lagoons and ponds in Central Park were always

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filled with ducks. Considering what he intended to do, perhaps it was a good omen.

Morning was as hot as night had been. The big, blond man lay still for long minutes after he'd awakened, enjoying the oscillating fan as it rippled the mat of crisp yellow hair on his chest. He had a head, but not too bad a one. He felt for the bottle of rye he'd set beside the bed. It was empty. It didn't matter. There was nothing wrong with him that a cup of coffee wouldn't cure.

He glanced at the sleeping girl beside him and debated prodding her awake, but felt too replete to move. It was a shame that Lydia didn't have a lot of money. When they weren't fighting, they got along just fine. The little fool loved him. There was nothing she wouldn't do, or hadn't done, for him. For all the scenes she made, he could, in her mind, do nothing wrong except make love to other women.

He yawned prodigiously and Lydia opened one eye. She stretched like a contented kitten, then snuggled closer to him and laid a small hand on his chest.

"Good morning, honey."

Ferron removed the hand. "Hi," he said coldly. "How about a pot of coffee?"

Lydia sat up obediently and reached for her negligee. "Right away, sweetheart. What time do you have to meet Whit?"

"To hell with Whit," Ferron said.

The red-haired girl slipped her bare feet into a pair of mules and scuffed through the apartment to the kitchenette. Ferron lay a moment longer listening to her fill the percolator and set out cups and saucers. It was a pleasant, homey sound, if one liked homey sounds.

He glanced at the expensive platinum watch that Lydia had given him as he padded into the bathroom to shower and shave. It was a few minutes after nine. By now the New Hope community had been up for hours. He knew. He'd spent sev-

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eral days at the farm and both old man Wayne and Amy had gotten up in the middle of the night to do whatever they did with the cows and chickens and other assorted livestock. Breakfast of home made country sausage, buckwheat cakes, maple syrup, eggs and fried potatoes and hot mince pie had been served at six-thirty. Ferron shuddered at the memory. It was a hell of a prospect to contemplate after a full fifth of rye. Still, all things considered, keeping in mind the score for which he was shooting, he could put up with it for a few months. It might just be, once she was married to him, Amy wouldn't get up quite so early.

Showered and shaved, he dressed and walked out to the kitchenette. It was bright with morning. The traffic eight floors below was a blurred, pleasant sound. Lydia had combed her hair and made up and put on a fresh negligee to replace the one he had torn. She was pathetically eager to please him, happy that he was with her. She'd even laid the morning paper beside his cup of coffee—to point out the comforts of domesticity, Ferron supposed.

"How do you feel this morning, sweetheart?" she asked him.

Ferron answered her with a grunt as he sipped his coffee and glanced at the first page of the paper. He had no need to read any farther. His and Whit's luck was holding. When the thing broke it would break over the front page of every paper in New York. Ferron felt sweat start on his forehead. And their luck couldn't hold forever. One of these mornings some sap was going to get up nerve enough to go to the D.A. When he did, it would be too bad for both of them. Ferron had no illusions. The police weren't dumb, they were smart. All they needed was a starting point. And once the skein of usury and blackmail and brutality started to unravel, everything would unwind, including the Roberts affair. There would be more hell raised in Manhattan than there had been since a smart Dutch con man had swindled the trusting

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Indians out of Manhattan Island for a few bales of bright cloth and trinkets reputed to be worth sixty guilders.

Ferron used his napkin to pat at the perspiration on his forehead. Waiting for the right time, hell. He was stalling. Now that he had Paul Parrish set up, he'd have to do what he had to do—soon. Whit was an egomaniac drunk with fifty percent interest. Whit thought this thing could go on forever.

Lydia sat across from him. "What are you worried about, Les?"

"Nothing," Ferron lied. "I'm just warm."

The red-haired girl shook her head. "No. You're worried. You have been for six months." She laid her hand on his. "Look, Les—"

Ferron looked at her over his cup of coffee. "Yes—?"

"Why don't we go away somewhere, just you and I?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"On what?"

"I've a few dollars left in the bank."

"And when that's gone?"

"I'll get more."

"How?"

Lydia was frank. "Any way I have to get it. Can't you get it through your head, Les, that I love you, that I'd do anything for you?"

"Anything?" Ferron taunted her.

Lydia continued to meet his eyes. "I've already done that. Where do you think your thousand dollar wrist watch came from? Or the money you've been dropping at Narragansett and Jamaica, and before that at Hialeah and Oaklawn? Certainly not on the hundred and fifty dollars a week that Whit pays you, or the few crummy modeling jobs you get."

Ferron looked at his wrist watch with new respect. He

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hadn't known it had cost so much. "That's right. Make me feel like a pea-eye."

Lydia's fingernails dug into the back of his hand. Her eyes filled with tears and ran over. "I'm not trying to make you feel like anything, Les. I'm just trying to make you understand how much I love you, that nothing matters to me but you." Her eyes, back of her tears, were bright. "Neither of us is any good. But together we have a chance for happiness. Why don't we take it?"

Ferron was bored. Crying women annoyed him. "Oh, for God's sake, Lydia," he said. "We've been over this so many times."

He pushed his cup away from him and walked into the living room. He telephoned his hotel to see if there were any phone messages for him. There were six, one from an old bag he'd swindled out of two hundred dollars and who he was trying to shake, one from Ben Howell of the modeling agency for which he worked on occasion, and three phone calls from Whit Bennett.

Ferron considered calling Whit, but dialed the number of the modeling agency instead. He would see Whit that afternoon. If it was anything important, Whit would have done more than phone. If the D.A.'s office had stepped in, the slimy little loan shark would be waiting in his hotel lobby, bleating to everyone who listened what an honest business man he was and how the police were all the time pushing him around.

Ferron repressed a shudder. All phone calls from Whit were similar. He usually wanted the fear of God thrown into some poor working stiff who'd defaulted his weekly interest. That usually meant a broken arm or leg, or smashed nose—or even a cracked head, like the one Ferron had given to young Roberts. Ferron realized he was breathing through his mouth. He still didn't see how he could have hit Roberts so

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hard. He hadn't meant to. All he'd meant to do was smack some sense into the punk.

"This is Les, Ben," he told the agent.

Ben Howell was glad to hear his voice. "Fine. I was afraid you might be out of town and I've got a quick fifty dollars for you, Les. Beat it over to the Acme Studio on 45th. They want a big, good looking, blond bruiser. You know. The virile, he-man type. It's another one of those true crime shots. The guy is supposed to have strangled his wife." The agent laughed. "With one hand yet." Howell added, "And if you can contact Lydia, she can pick up a quick fifty, too."

"How come?" Ferron asked.

Howell told him. "I had a cute little redhead lined up for the job. She's here in my office now. But she showed up so stinking, I have something else for her in mind."

Ferron laughed. "Okay. Sure, Ben. I'll take Lydia with me. She'll be glad to pick up a quick fifty."

From the doorway of the kitchenette, no longer crying but still sullen-eyed, Lydia asked him, "How?"

"With all your clothes on, darling," Ferron told her. "Anyway, most of them. It's one of those one shot quickies for one of the true crime magazines."

He asked the girl on the switchboard to have his car brought around, then cradled the phone and stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out the window, while he waited for Lydia to dress.

Perhaps he was narrowing it down too fine, trying to be too clever. The longer he delayed killing Whit, the less chance he had of success. Paul Parrish was established, had been established for six months. Amy *wanted* to marry him. Her father *wanted* him to marry her. Old man Wayne had told him so.

"... *But I'll be glad, and I know Amy will, when we have*

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you with us always. Don't make it too far distant, Paul. I have enough of the world's goods for us all."

Ferron's active mind raced on. Once Les Ferron abandoned his flashy car on the streets of Fort Lee or Leonia or Coytesville, and Paul Parrish drove north in his ancient Plymouth, there would be nothing to connect the two men. No one in New York knew him by the name of Parrish. He'd rented the suburban house in Fort Lee from a busy real estate man, paying a year's rent in advance in lieu of giving references. The realtor couldn't possibly connect a Mr. Thompson he'd seen once with Les Ferron. If he did, so what? Les Ferron would be on the lam, leaving no fingerprints behind him.

Instinctively Ferron took out his handkerchief and wiped the phone he had used. When he did decide to kill Whit, he'd have to spend another night with Lydia and go over the apartment carefully and remove any possible trace of his presence.

Lydia came out of the bedroom wearing a smart street dress, looking like a Powers model, but with her eyes still slightly puffed from her recent outburst of tears. "You do love me, at least a little, don't you, Les?"

Ferron patted a convenient curve. "Sure, baby," he assured her. "I'm crazy about you. I always come home, don't I?"

Lydia craned her neck to look at the back of her stockings. The heavy black seam of her right stocking was crooked. She straightened the seam, then lifted her skirt and refastened her garter. "If only you'd stay home."

The open yellow car was waiting in front of the building. Ferron drove south on Central Park West, then around Columbus Circle and continued south on the Avenue Of The Americas.

Ferron liked the feel of the crowded street. He liked the motion and the noise and color. The wide open spaces were strictly for the peasants. He glanced sideways as he drove.

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He even liked Lydia. She was as pretty—perhaps even prettier—than Amy, in a brittle, sophisticated way. She'd put up with a lot and done a lot for him. More, she was right about neither of them being any good, but being good for each other. Spending a night with Lydia was like wrestling a man-eating tigress in a barrel going over Niagara Falls. A man never knew just what was going to happen next, When Lydia loved a man, she went all the way. It was a shame she didn't have more money than she could make with her voice and body. If she had even fifty grand or so, he might give her a break. After he'd finished with Amy, Paul Parrish might look her up and take her to Rio with him. Even without money. That way, if what he intended to steal from Whit and con from old man Wayne should slip through his fingers, he'd always have a meal ticket.

Ferron was tempted, then put the thought from his mind as he parked a quarter of a block from the studio. The break with his current past would have to be final. Besides, what the hell? According to the last census there were 101,895,661 people in South America. Figuring the law of percentage, half of them had to be women. And when it came to falling in love with a good looking, virile young *el toro,* Ferron doubted very much if South American women were any different from their North American cousins.

The thought amused Ferron. He laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Lydia asked.

"Just thinking of something," he told her.

He'd worked for the Acme Studio at least fifty times. They wanted a series of three shots, one of him skulking outside a window and looking in under a shade at his estranged wife undressing, one of him inside their bedroom threatening her, and the last and final of the series showing him choking Lydia with one hand while she lay on the disordered bed with her slip as high as her hips and as much

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cleavage showing as was possible within the realm of reasonable taste.

It was hot and close in the studio. The fifth of rye he'd drunk the night before returned to foul Ferron's mouth. The bright floodlights hurt his eyes. The photographer insisted on taking three pictures of each pose to make certain he got a good one. The whole thing took less than an hour but Ferron was glad when it was over. Modeling was a hell of a way to make a living. While Lydia dressed and recombed her hair he walked on out into the front office to draw the hundred dollars they had coming.

The cashier was a mannish blonde. She shook her head at him when he asked for his money. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ferron," she said, "but Mr. Howell asked specifically that the checks for this job be sent directly to his office. He intimated it was something about back commissions that you have neglected to pay."

Ferron swore softly under his breath. He owed Howell at least sixty dollars in back commissions. If the smug bastard deducted it all, he'd have less than forty dollars left for an hour's sweating. And half of that *should* go to Lydia.

"Now what?" Lydia asked him as they walked down the stairs together.

Ferron continued to scowl. "We've been swindled. Ben asked the studio to send the checks over to him so he can deduct his back commission."

"So?"

"So I'm broke." It was even hotter on the street than it had been. Heat rose from the walk in shimmering waves. It beat down from the brassy sky. Ferron's irritability increased. "So broke I can't even buy a beer. And it's all your fault."

"My fault?"

"You heard what I said. When I checked in last night I gave the doorman at your joint my last fin."

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Lydia wet her over-red lips with her tongue, then opened the swank leather shoulder bag that she was wearing. "I can let you have a twenty, Les."

Ferron took the bill from her fingers. "It's better than nothing."

"You're going to see Whit now?"

"I suppose I'd better."

"And tonight?"

Ferron pushed his Panama back on his head as he admired the bobbling posterior of a passing blonde. "That I wouldn't know. There were three phone calls from Whit. He's probably got a job for me."

"I don't like you working for Whit."

"I don't like to work for him."

Lydia laid her hand on his sleeve. "Look, Les—"

Ferron returned his attention to her. "Yes?"

"About us."

"What about us?"

"I don't want to be nosey, or over-possessive, but . . ."

Ferron could feel the hot walk through the thin soles of his shoes. He wanted a cold glass of beer. He wanted to get out of the heat. "Come to the point."

The red-haired girl's eyes continued to search his face. "You know how I feel about you, Les. And there isn't any other woman, I mean really important woman, is there?"

Ferron told her what she wanted to know. "Of course not." He smiled and patted her. "Now you run along like a good girl and the chances are I'll see you tonight."

Lydia squeezed his arm. "I'll be waiting."

Ferron watched her down the heat drenched walk, then crossed to the air conditioned bar on the far side of the street. He ordered a glass of beer at the bar and, carrying it with him, sat across from a sharp-faced little man sitting in the back booth.

"Who's DeSpirito riding in the fourth?"

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The bookie consulted a scratch sheet. "Sunspot."

Ferron laid the twenty dollar bill that Lydia had given him on the table. "On the nose." He studied the bookie's Form as he sipped at his beer. Then, slipping a thick sheaf of bills from his inside coat pocket, he laid a second twenty on top of the one already on the table. "And the same on Mandalay in the sixth. Just in case."

The bookie put the money in his pocket and made a notation on the pad in front of him. "You're nuts. But hell—it's your dough you're betting."

Ferron threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter Four

FERRON'S STOMACH gurgled pleasantly as he walked back down 45th Street to the car. The sun no longer seemed quite so hot. Four glasses of beer, with two double assists from a bottle of Old Overholt, had left him with a pleasant glow.

He lit a cigarette, amused, as he lowered his bulk gingerly to the hot leather upholstery. He might as well enjoy the minor vices while he could. Paul Parrish would not drink, smoke or bet on horses. All Paul Parrish would do would be sing hymns and be fruitful.

The thought excited him. The night he and Amy were married he must remember to quote to her from the Song Of Solomon. He would begin:

"'How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, Oh prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hand of a cunning workman.'"

Then:

"'Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not

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liquor: thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.'"

Ferron was even more amused. There it was. Right in the Bible. Old Solomon had been quite a man. As he switched on the ignition of his car and pulled away from the curb, he wondered what it would be like to be married to a thousand women. One thing was for sure. It would keep even a good man busy.

The light on Fifth Avenue was against him. Ferron realized it tardily and had to stand on his brake to keep from ramming into the car ahead of him. The incident sobered him. All he needed was to be picked up on a drunken driving rap. That would fix everything fine.

He made a decorous left turn and drove north on Fifth Avenue past Central Park and into the lower fringes of Harlem, angling left down a series of wide streets toward the ancient brownstone front that Whit Bennett used as an office.

The narrow streets were alive with children screaming at their play. Their parents sat on the crumbling steps of the overcrowded tenements that rose sheer and ugly on both sides of the streets. Ferron looked at them with distaste. These were Whit Bennett's clients.

They came into the office with shawls over their heads or their battered hats in their hands to negotiate the small loans that were never completely repaid, the twenty and fifty and hundred dollar loans, without tangible security, that the regular loan companies couldn't be bothered about.

"Please, Mr. Bennett," they'd say. "I no can pay the rent." Or, "My little Tony is sick. He's a need a doctor, bad. I gotta good job. I pay. But right for now, until a next pay day, I would like to borrow fifty dollars."

The little people of the city, living from pay day to pay day, always teetering on the ragged edge of hunger and total oblivion.

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And Whit would lend them the money, at three percent a week, twelve percent a month, one hundred and fifty percent a year, until the original loan became so swamped with interest it was seldom or never repaid, not even after Whit had collected three or four hundred dollars.

Ferron gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. Whit would lend them the money and it was Ferron's job to see that they kept up the interest. He put the fear of God in them. He kept them from blabbing to the police or the District Attorney's office. For a lousy one hundred and fifty dollars a week. While Whit was growing rich.

Ferron curbed his car back of an ice truck and sat looking at the brownstone front across the street. The sign in the window read—SMALL LOANS.

It couldn't go on. It wouldn't. The whole deal was strictly illegal. There were stringent laws against usury. Sooner or later the D.A.'s office would crack down. The only things that had saved them so far were the gambling exposé and the Kefauver investigation. The big brass had been so busy trying to explain their own swollen bank accounts, they hadn't had time to put the small fry on the skillet. That and the fact that Whit was a former New York detective who had allegedly lost a leg in the line of duty, and his former brother officers were leaning backwards to give him a break.

Ferron got out of his car. In the line of duty, hell. Whit had been trying a shakedown when an annoyed narcotics pusher had climbed his monkey and put five .45 slugs where the little loan shark's kneecap had formerly been.

He was willing to quit if Whit was. But the little man wouldn't quit. He was making too much money. Nor would he allow Ferron to quit. Every time Ferron mentioned the subject, all Bennett had to do was remind him of a young colored veteran who had been found in the hallway of a tenement building with his skull resembling a cracked egg

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shell, a young veteran by the name of Roberts whose pretty young wife had been going to have a baby.

As Ferron crossed the narrow street, the children stopped playing and looked at him with dull eyes. An old man tipped his hat. "It's a nice day, Mr. Ferron."

"Yeah. Sure. Swell," Ferron said.

He climbed the steps of the brownstone and pushed open the door. The usual nauseous smell of stale air, rotting wood, and defective plumbing welcomed him. The brownstone front always reminded Ferron of the buildings in which his parents had lived. Even as a child he'd decided what he wanted out of life. When he was a man, the places in which he lived would smell sweet. He might have to worry about a brace of cops knocking on his door but there would be steak in the refrigerator and the rent would be paid on time. No matter how he got it. His old man had banged on the drum all his life and in the end life had banged him. He'd wound up in Potter's Field, babbling to the last about the many mansions in his Father's house.

There was no one in the shabby office but behind the frosted glass of one of the conference rooms Ferron could hear Whit selling a would-be borrower the usual bill of goods.

"Well," the little man was saying suavely, "perhaps the interest is a little high. But you must remember, Mr. Fajardo, that you haven't a bit of security. And, after all, the interest on a fifty dollar loan is only a dollar and a half a week. Now that isn't very much, is it?"

"N-no," the man back of the frosted glass admitted.

Multiply it by fifty-two, chump, Ferron thought.

"Okay, then," Whit said. "Here's the money. Now if you'll just sign this card, please."

Ferron lighted a fresh cigarette and sat with one hip on Bennett's desk. A few minutes later the door of the small conference room opened and a harassed-looking, middle-

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aged Puerto Rican came out, clutching a small sheaf of bills.

Whit Bennett limped after him. He was a small, slight man in his early forties. Bennett looked across the office at Ferron. "Oh, so you finally got here."

Ferron continued to smoke. "You're looking at me."

"This is my associate, Mr. Ferron, Mr. Fajardo," Bennett said. "I'm glad you had a chance to meet him." His voice continued suave. "Because, if for any reason you should forget to meet the interest on your loan, Mr. Ferron will be the gentleman who will call on you."

Fajardo looked at Ferron's immaculate white clad bulk and, instinctively, took off his hat. "*Si.* I understand, *senor.*"

Still clutching the bills in his hand, the man scuttled out of the office sideways.

Bennett continued to his desk. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Here and there."

"I phoned you three times."

"So the hotel told me. What's eating you?"

Bennett sat in his chair and stretched his artificial leg in front of him. "Plenty. You may or may not recall a guy by the name of Roberts to whom I made a small loan."

Ferron stood up and pushed his hat back on his head. "Do we have to go through that again?"

Bennett nodded. "I'm afraid we do." There was a breathless, almost small boy quality to his voice, a small boy afraid of the dark. "It would seem that Roberts had, or rather has, a brother by the name of Jim. And said brother, just back from Korea, was in here late Saturday afternoon, throwing his weight around and making all sort of wild talk."

"About what?"

"About going to the D.A. and asking him to re-open the case. Wondering how it was possible for his brother to have

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paid one hundred and sixty dollars on a seventy dollar loan and still owe sixty dollars. Talk about how funny it was his brother Bill should happen to be mugged on the very night of the afternoon he'd been in here to tell me he was damned if he'd pay any more principle or interest on the money he'd borrowed, as Jim put it, 'to birth his child.' "

Ferron fought down a wave of nausea. "So?"

Bennett eased his artificial leg. "So I stalled him. I told him what a fine guy I thought his brother was and how sorry I'd been to read that he'd been killed."

"Did he fall for it?"

"I don't think so."

"How do you know?"

"He was still hell bound to re-open the case and involve me. So, man to man, I asked him to think it over seriously before he did anything, then come back and talk to me again tonight. I explained that making false accusations against a former New York detective was a serious thing and he could get both himself and his brother's widow into a lot of trouble."

"And then?"

"I tried to get in touch with you."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Bennett told him. "Beat his goddam brains in. Give him the same treatment you gave his brother. I can't stand an investigation."

"*You* can't stand an investigation?"

"All right. *We* can't stand an investigation." Bennett slipped a card out of one of the corners of his blotter. "Here's the address he gave me. He's living with his brother's widow up on Lenox Avenue."

Ferron fingered the card. If it wasn't broad daylight, if his car wasn't parked in front of the building, if he wasn't afraid that Whit's body would be found before he could reach either the Lincoln Tunnel or the bridge, he'd do what had to

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be done right now and get it over. But he needed night and darkness and time. "All right," he said finally. "I'll go talk to the guy."

Bennett's voice was shrill. "You'd better do more than talk."

Ferron was amused. "You sound as if you're frightened."

"I am

Ferron gave him a last out. "Then why don't we just blow?"

Bennett shook his head. "No. I'm making money, real money, for the first time in my life. I like it. Besides, I pay you to handle things like this."

"A hundred and fifty dollars a week."

"I didn't tell you to kill the guy, did I? All I said was beat him up."

"So you did," Ferron admitted. "What time is this Jim Roberts supposed to show?"

"We didn't set any time."

"How long will you be here?"

"Until I hear from you."

"Fine," Ferron said quietly. He dropped the card into his pocket. "I'll be back sometime after dark."

A dozen children were clustered around the yellow Cadillac, touching it, patting it, admiring the leather upholstery. They scattered to the safety of their respective stoops when they saw Ferron come out of the brownstone front.

He was wryly amused. Now I scare little children, he thought.

He drove north to the address on the card that Whit had given him. The building was some better than those around the office, but not much. At least here the children didn't run from him. Both he and Whit were unknown to upper Lenox Avenue. It had its own loan sharks.

Ferron located the name Roberts on the mail box and walked up through the heat and assorted smells to the third

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floor back. The door of the apartment was cracked to catch what little air was stirring in the hall. What he could see of the apartment was clean and neat but poverty-ridden.

Ferron rapped on the door jamb, wondering what he was going to say to Roberts, what he *could* say. All he could do, really, was stall, perhaps slip the man a few dollars, anything to keep the veteran away from Whit until Ferron had finished with Whit.

A pretty girl came to the door holding a gurgling infant in her arms. "Y-yes?" she asked uncertainly.

It was the first time Ferron had seen the widow of the man he had killed. Whit had told him she was pretty. She was. Very pretty. "I'd like to talk to Jim Roberts," he told her.

The girl shook her head. "Jim ain't here." Her face brightened. "But if you're the man from the D.A.'s office in answer to the letter he wrote about Bill, Jim said to say you can find him in the Palace Bar. That's just down the block a ways."

"I see," Ferron said. "When did he write this letter?"

"This morning," the girl said.

Ferron realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled slowly. "I see," he repeated. He lifted his hat. "Well, thank you a lot, Miss—"

The girl was pleased by the simple courtesy. "*Mrs. Roberts,*" she smiled. "I'm the widow of the man who was killed. And this is his baby."

Ferron looked from her to the baby in her arms, then replaced his hat and walked back down the stairs. His knees gave as he walked. His body felt slimy, as if it was drenched with perspiration. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled. He wished he hadn't hit Roberts so hard. He really hadn't intended to.

The Palace Bar was in the middle of the block. It was long and narrow and cool, with a row of booths along one wall. All of its patrons were colored. The barman stood a moment,

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as if undecided, then mopped the spotless wood in front of Ferron with an immaculate bar rag.

"Yes, sir?"

Ferron lighted a cigarette. "Rye and a short beer."

His drink in one hand, his cigarette in the other, he looked over the men at the bar. None of them were in uniform. Then he saw the man for whom he was looking slumped in a booth with a half-filled whiskey bottle and an empty shot glass in front of him. On the uniform sleeve that was visible, Ferron could see a technical sergeant's chevrons. He asked the barman if the man in the booth was Jim Roberts, adding, "Mrs. Roberts said I'd find him here."

The barman was more friendly than he had been. "This is one time I got fooled," he laughed. "I thought I could spot a Big Eyes a block away, but I sure slipped up on you. You're from the D.A.'s office, huh?"

Ferron didn't bother to correct him.

"Yeah. Sure," the barman said, "that's Jim in the booth."

Ferron carried his glass across the aisle and sat in the booth opposite the man already occupying it. "The barman tells me you're Jim Roberts."

The soldier lifted his eyes from his empty shot glass. "That's my name."

Ferron studied the fruit salad on the sergeant's chest. The big man was, obviously, a career soldier. He was wearing a half dozen campaign ribbons, all of them with battle stars, a Purple Heart ribbon, a Bronze Star, and an infantry combat badge. "Brother of Bill Roberts?"

"That's right." The big sergeant, a little drunk, nodded his approval. "You guys are fast. I just mailed the letter this morning."

Ferron considered the letter. It would take at least a full day for it to be processed and a man assigned to investigate it. He had possibly twenty-four hours in which to do what had to be done. By this time tomorrow Les Ferron would

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have to disappear and Paul Parrish be hard at work selling Bibles and religious objets d'art in upper, rural New-York. He said, "Let's start with your call on Whit Bennett."

"That louse."

"You think he killed your brother, huh?"

"Or had him killed."

"Why?"

Roberts said, "God almighty, mister. Use your head. Look at the facts. Bill was a good kid, but he was dumb. He borrows a hundred dollars from the loan shark to birth his baby. He pays back a hundred and sixty and then finds out he still owes almost as much as he borrowed in the first place. So, instead of going directly to you guys, he blows his top and tells Bennett he ain't going to pay any more interest or principle. And what happens?"

"You tell me."

"Sure. The slimy little shark can't let him get out of line for fear all the other sheep will bleat out of line after him. So he sends a strong arm ape over to where he and Shirley used to live to talk to Bill. And the ape talked to him too hard."

"It's down as a mugging in the book."

"Sure. That's because the precinct cops who made the investigation didn't have the facts and Shirley was afraid to talk for fear the same thing might happen to her and the baby. She even moved out of the neighborhood."

"And waited until you came back from Korea."

"That's right." The big sergeant refilled his shot glass. "And it ain't right as if Bill was a lush or a lippie chaser. He was just a hard working young punk who loved his wife and got in a tough spot for the ready when the baby came along." Roberts gulped the whiskey. "And then that slimy little shark tries to tell me *I* can get in trouble for making false accusations against a former New York detective. That's when I really blew my top and decided to write you guys."

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"I see," Ferron said.

Roberts refilled the glass he'd just emptied. "You guys better do more than see."

"And if we can't?"

"I'm going back down there to Bennett's and beat his goddam brains in."

From the bar the barman cautioned, "Nix now, Jim. Watch what you're saying. All shooting off your mouth like that is going to do is get you into trouble."

"Let him talk," Ferron said. "I know how he feels. After all, the dead man was his brother."

Chapter Five

THE DOOR WAS CLOSED this time. Ferron propped the drunken sergeant against the wall with one hand while he rapped on the door with the other.

"Beat his goddam brains in," Jim Roberts said thickly.

"Sure. You do that," Ferron panted. "In the morning."

Shirley Roberts opened the door, struggling into a cheap cotton kimono. Ferron had a brief but enticing glimpse of light-cocoa thigh and cleavage. The girl was barefoot. Her crisp black hair was damp around the edges. She smelled sweet and clean. From the damp spots that began to appear on the kimono and the wet footprints on the floor, Ferron deduced that she'd been bathing and hadn't even stopped to towel when she'd heard the knock on the door.

The girl looked from her sagging brother-in-law to Ferron and clutched the cheap kimono still tighter.

"Jim shouldn't have ought to got drunk," she said.

For a moment Ferron saw two of her. He brushed the whiskey fumes aside. "No," he agreed. "He shouldn't. But if

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you'll show me where he sleeps, I'll settle him for the night before I leave."

The girl hesitated briefly, then opened the door still wider. "I was just getting ready to go to work," she explained, nodding toward the confusion in the small apartment. "An' the bathtub don't drain right so we have to wash where we can." She snatched a ragged but clean bath towel from an ancient black leather couch in the combination kitchen and living room. "Jim, he sleeps on here."

Ferron eased the drunken soldier to the couch. "Easy as she goes, soldier."

Roberts' lips moved with an effort. "Beat his goddam brains in," he repeated, and promptly began to snore.

Shirley tried to excuse him. "He feels awful bad about Bill. Him an' Bill was very close."

Ferron straightened and looked at her. "Yes. So he's been telling me for the past four hours."

He wondered what the expression was that corresponded to lippie chaser. A lippie chaser was a Negro buck who liked white women. And he could go for Shirley. He could go for the girl in a big way. She wasn't more than seventeen, eighteen at the most. Bearing a child hadn't hurt her figure. Her stomach was flat. Her hips flared where they should. The firm, peaked breasts under the taut kimono were the shape of twin Bartlett pears . . .

Ferron glanced at the door of the room he assumed to be her bedroom. "How's for a look at the baby?"

Shirley said, "The lady downstairs takes care of him while I work. He's down there with her now."

The silence in the apartment grew strained. Shirley clutched her kimono still tighter. Ferron wished he had more time. He recalled reading there were certain tribes in Africa who punished a murderer by forcing him to live with the murdered man's wife until he'd seeded a new life to replace the one he'd taken. It would be a pleasure with Shirley.

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The girl broke the awkward silence. "Thank you for bringing Jim home. You're going to do something about Bill?"

Ferron realized he was drunk. He had a right to be. He'd been drinking steadily for four hours. It had been the only way he could make certain the big sergeant would stay put and not blow the whistle on Whit before he was ready to have it blown.

"Yes, certainly," he assured the girl.

He wondered what she would do if he put his arm around her and kissed her, and knew even as he wondered. Color was no bridge of morals. The pretty colored girl would slap his face and scream. Her screams would arouse her drunken brother-in-law and then all hell would pop.

Ferron walked reluctantly to the door. "Yes, certainly," he repeated. "We'll make a thorough investigation."

Shirley walked to the door with him. "I'm glad. Bill didn't belong to die. He was a good man. Bill never done nothing to no one." She glanced at her snoring brother-in-law. "And thanks again for bringing Jim home."

"It was a pleasure," Ferron smiled.

He gave her a pat that could be construed as friendly and swaggered back down the stairs, the hand he had patted her with tingling. Damn, she was a pretty little thing.

The sun had set but the teeming street was still filled with heat and screaming children. At this time of year it would be light for another hour or so. As Ferron got into his car, a twelve-year-old said:

"That's a nice car you got there, mister."

"Yes. Isn't it?" Ferron agreed with him.

The news had spread. "You're a copper, ain't you? A plainclothesman from the D.A.'s office?"

"What do you think?" Ferron smiled.

He started his car, swung it in a wide U-turn, and drove

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back the way he had come, making allowance for his alcohol-dulled reflexes.

The afternoon spent with Roberts and the knowledge that time was running out on him had left him with a slightly breathless feeling, but at least the big sergeant was out of his hair. He was one complication removed. When the District Attorney's office did investigate the letter in the morning, they could make what they wanted to out of the impersonation. He wouldn't be around to be questioned.

On impulse he pulled into the curb at 114th Street and, after buying a Bromo Seltzer to clear some of the whiskey fumes from his head, called Whit from a pay phone.

Bennett sounded worried. "How do things look, Les?" he asked.

"Not so good," Ferron said curtly. He breathed heavily into the mouthpiece for a moment. "Stay where you are until I get there. And that may not be for another hour or so."

He hung up on the other man's protests and drove on through the park to his hotel on Central Park West.

There was the usual bustle of incoming and departing guests. The doorman touched the brim of his cap as Ferron pulled up in front of the marquee and braked his car.

"Well, long time no see you, Mr. Ferron. Anyway a couple of days."

Ferron got out of the car. "Just squeeze it in somewhere, will you, John. I'll be down again in a few minutes."

The doorman palmed the proffered bill. "Sure thing, Mr. Ferron. I'll double park you and to hell with the cops."

"Now is that a nice thing to say?" Ferron chided.

He rode up to his suite on the eleventh floor still thinking of Shirley.

The sight of his expensively furnished three room suite increased his breathless feeling. It was a shame he had to leave it for the sway-backed bed in Mrs. Harvey's rooming

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house or an equally bleak room in the aged Inn in New Hope. It had taken him a long time to work up to a suite at the St. Biarritz.

The suite was, as always, spotless. It smelled like the dead man's widow had smelled, sweet and clean.

Ferron changed from his natural color Shantung suit to a lightweight dark tropical worsted. Then, getting an oversize turkish towel from the bathroom, working swiftly but without haste, he wiped all the plane surfaces that the maid might have missed. Satisfied there were no prints of his fingers in the room, he tossed the towel in the tub and pulled on a pair of gray silk dress gloves.

He started to pack a traveling bag with suits; then, struck by a sudden thought, he went through the papers in his wallet to make certain there was nothing in the wallet to connect Les Ferron with Paul Parrish. One of the first things he saw was the receipt Mrs. Harvey had given him when he'd paid the rent on his room in the Falls.

It had been stupid of him to keep it. He treated it as he had treated the other receipts she had given him. He burned it in an ash tray and flushed the ashes down the drain.

His feeling of breathlessness continued to grow. Now that the break had come he was eager to get it over with. He finished packing the bag he'd started to pack, then called the desk and asked the room clerk to send up a boy and to ask the cashier to have his current statement ready.

The clerk was perturbed. "You're not leaving us, Mr. Ferron?"

Ferron forced himself to laugh. "Just for a few days. And by the way, Henri—"

"Yes, sir?"

"If a big man who looks like a husband should happen to ask for me, tell him that I've enlisted in the French Foreign Legion."

The clerk laughed politely. "I'll do that, Mr. Ferron."

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Ferron cradled the phone, peeled off his gloves and put them in his pocket, then lit and smoked a cigarette while he waited for a bellboy to come up for his bag.

At the cashier's window he again intimated that he was in a spot of triangular trouble and would be away for a few days, but requested that his rooms be held for him.

"Of course, Mr. Ferron," the cashier smiled. "You're one of our most valued guests."

As long as I pay the tab, Ferron thought.

Back in his car again, he drove aimlessly, waiting for dark. He had no illusions. The search for him would be thorough. All he could hope to do was confuse the investigation as much as possible. Les Ferron *had* to disappear in Fort Lee.

The last of the twilight faded. Night closed in on the city slowly. Family groups took refuge from the heat on rusted fire escapes and the front stoops of the long rows of shabby buildings with common retaining walls.

Ferron swung north again and drove slowly up Broadway. The lights of the bars and restaurants and theatres had never looked more attractive. He thrilled to the crowds on the walks. Ferron shuddered slightly as he compared the scene with New Hope. By now the little farming town was getting ready to go to bed. The only reason it didn't roll up its sidewalks with sundown was that it had no sidewalks to roll. One thing was certain: he was going to miss New York.

Satisfied it was dark enough, or would be dark enough by the time he reached the brownstone front building on the lower fringe of Harlem, he drove to a parking lot a block from Lydia's apartment and, tipping the attendant lavishly, told him that he would probably be late in returning for the car.

The attendant nodded sagely. "We've had your car here before. Lots of times, Mr. Ferron. In fact it was here last night. All night."

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Ferron pretended surprise. "That's right. It was."

He walked in the direction of the apartment hotel in which Lydia lived, then crossed the street and continued on to the Eighth Avenue subway entrance.

The subway car was crowded, and Ferron rode, holding onto a strap, to 42nd Street. At 42nd Street he took the shuttle over to Grand Central Station and the IRT and rode back the way he had come, only on the opposite side of the city.

110th Street was as crowded as the Forties and Fifties had been. Whole families, carrying chairs and blankets and jugs and greasy packages of food, were headed for the imagined coolness of the park.

Ferron lost himself in the maze of narrow streets, constantly angling north. In the yellow pools of light formed by the street lamps, half naked children still screamed at their play. There was a constant blare of radios and television sets and juke boxes. Both the front stoops and the neighborhood bars were doing a good business. Sad eyed little Puerto Rican beauties strolled the walks, looking hopeful whenever a male eyed them. No one paid any attention to Ferron. They were used to seeing him in the big yellow car. Tonight he was just another man.

Two blocks from the brownstone front he turned down the street that ran behind it and walked briskly until he was opposite the building. Then cutting through a dark areaway, he climbed the high board fence that separated the two properties, and stood panting, listening to the pound of his heart, in the small back yard of the building in which Whit Bennett lived and had his office.

While he waited for his breathing to return to normal, Ferron fitted the gray silk dress gloves to his fingers. There was a light in the front office but Whit's sleeping quarters were dark.

Ferron crossed his gloved fingers for luck, picked his way

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through the cans and bottles and refuse in the yard to the basement boiler room door and inserted a skeleton key in the lock. The door, squeaking on its unoiled hinges, opened into sour-smelling blackness. Ferron closed the door behind him but left it unlocked.

His back to the door, he stood a moment, listening. Any sound on the floor above was inaudible here. There was no clamor from the windows overlooking the two small yards he had crossed. Satisfied that no one had seen him enter the building, he slipped out of his shoes and, carrying them in one hand, felt his way through the darkness to the stairs. The stairs were wooden and aged. Ferron tested each step carefully before entrusting his weight to it. Whit had a .38. What was more, he knew how to use it.

The unlocked stair door opened into the kitchen. Ferron closed it noiselessly behind him. He could hear Whit now. Whit was pacing the front office, as well as a one-legged man could pace.

A short hall led to the front door. Ferron tiptoed down the hall and looked at the lock. Whit had left the front door unlocked for him. He put on his shoes and laced them. He peeled off his gloves and stuffed them in his coat pocket. He opened and closed the front door. Then, simulating haste, he walked briskly down the short hall and used the butt of his hand to push open the office door.

The former detective whirled to face him. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

Ferron leaned against the door. "You know damn well where I've been. I've been talking to Jim Roberts."

"How does it look?"

Ferron shook his head. "I told you that over the phone. From where I'm standing, it doesn't look good."

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Chapter Six

BENNETT LIMPED PAINFULLY to his desk and leaned against it. "Well, don't just stand there. Tell me. You smacked Roberts around?"

Ferron moved his head from side to side. "No. I got drunk with him."

"You what?"

"You heard me."

Bennett bit the end from a cigar. "Come again. I don't get you."

"I got drunk with him. I spent four hours matching drink for drink with him in a bar up on Lenox Avenue."

"Why?"

"Because the only thing I could do was get him drunk."

"You did okay with his brother."

"This one is different. You saw him. He's six feet two inches tall. He weighs two hundred pounds. And he's got a chestful of fruit salad they gave him for killing God knows how many geeks and gooks."

Bennett lit his cigar, smugly superior. "You were afraid of him, huh?"

Ferron was truthful. "No, not particularly."

"Then why didn't you beat some sense into him? Why didn't you beat his goddam brains in?"

The phrase had an oddly familiar sound. Ferron wished the dryness in his mouth would go away. He said, simply, "Because it wouldn't have done any good."

"Why not?"

"He's already written a letter to the D.A."

"He *what?*"

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"He's already written a letter to the D.A. A letter stating the facts as told him by his brother's wife, Shirley. Namely, that his kid brother, Bill, borrowed one hundred dollars from you, paid back one hundred and sixty, found out he still owed you seventy dollars, refused to pay any more, and that same night he was mugged. As Sergeant Roberts put it, 'to keep the other sheep from bleating out of line.'"

Bennett's thin voice bordered on hysteria. "Goddam it. I didn't tell you to kill him. All I said was to beat him."

Ferron looked at his clenched fist. "So you did."

"When did he mail this letter?"

"This morning."

"What time?"

"About nine o'clock, he says. He says he thought it over all day Sunday. He says he weighed everything you'd told him, decided it was a bunch of crap, and went directly to the big brass."

Bennett picked up the phone on his desk, then recradled it.

"You can't fix it, huh?" Ferron asked.

Bennett resumed his painful pacing. "You know damn well I can't. If I could have gotten hold of Manny or Tom this morning I might have been able to have the letter snaked out of the mail. But now—" Bennett stopped pacing and hurled his unlighted cigar at the wall. "Goddam. Why did you have to kill the bastard?"

"I didn't mean to," Ferron said meekly. "I didn't realize how hard I was hitting him."

"You didn't realize how hard you were hitting him." Bennett took a bottle of whiskey from a cabinet in the wall, drank from the neck of the bottle, then replaced it without offering Ferron a drink.

Ferron's eyes narrowed slightly but he made no comment.

Bennett wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Where's Roberts now?"

"Passed out drunk in his sister's flat," Ferron told him.

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He added, earnestly, "But the very last thing he told me was that if the D.A.'s office hadn't acted by tomorrow night, he was going to come back down here and beat on you."

Bennett opened the middle drawer of his desk and laid a black bone butted .38 revolver on his desk. "Ha. I'm nōt afraid of Roberts." He glanced at the drawn shade on the front window and it was obvious the statement was so many words.

"So what do we do now?" Ferron asked.

Bennett made his decision. "I don't care what you do. I know what I'm going to do."

"What?"

The former detective patted at the opalescent drops of perspiration beading on his cheeks and forehead. "I'm going to blow. I'm getting out of town tonight. I'm heading for Mexico City on the first plane I can get a seat on."

Ferron asked, almost stupidly, "So what happens to me?"

Bennett was candid with him. "I don't give a damn. You got me into this mess." He was sorry for himself. "Just when everything was going so fine, when I was making money, real money, for the first time in my life."

Ferron lighted a cigarette, wiped the package of book matches absently on the skirt of his coat, then dropped it on the small table beside the door. "No one can prove I killed Roberts."

Bennett controlled his breathing with an effort. "Don't be too sure. Cops can do the damnedest things. I know. I used to be one." He shook his head. "But that's not what I'm worried about. They can't touch me there and I don't give a damn what happens to you. I'm thinking of the investigation. If they pull me in for usury it'll take every dime I've put away to fight the rap. And with everyone getting so goddam moral, the chances are I can't beat it."

He stuffed the gun between his tight belt and lean belly and limped toward the door of the office.

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Ferron stepped aside to allow him to pass. "Where are you going, Whit?"

Bennett said, "To pack. I'm getting out of here. Now. At that it's a good thing you talked to the big bastard. I should have a twelve hour start."

He limped on down the hall toward the bedroom that opened off the kitchen. Ferron stood where he was, looking at the gold lettered sign showing through the drawn shade on the big front window. Whit had reacted about as he had expected him to react. For a moment Ferron was a boy again, a big eyed, tow haired, hungry youngster, standing on a snowy slum corner listening to his father explain the feast of Belshazzar to a cluster of bleary-eyed drunks.

Like Belshazzar's feast, all good things came to an end. Ferron mentally quoted passages three, four, and five from the fifth chapter of Daniel, verbatim:

'Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them.

'They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.

'In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and he wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.'

Ferron continued to stare at the reversed sign on the window. From where he stood it read—SMALL LOANS.

The only difference was that in the parable in the Bible the partly seen hand had written:

'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.'

Ferron compared himself to Daniel. The comparison amused him. In this instance he and not God had numbered Bennett's kingdom and finished it. When it came to the final showdown, Whit had been weighed in the balance and found

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wanting. Ferron's tight smile widened. But if any Mede or Persian got any of the loot that was stashed in the safe in the former detective's sleeping quarters, they would have to fight him for it.

He snuffed the cigarette he was smoking and put the butts in his pocket. He fitted the gray silk dress gloves to his fingers. He switched off the light in the office. He walked out in the hall and snapped the spring lock on the door. Then, turning out the hall light, he walked slowly down the narrow yellow runner to Whit's bedroom.

Bennett had laid a cheap traveling bag and an expensive saddle leather director's case on the bed and was limping back and forth between the bed and the clothes closet. As Ferron watched, Bennett stuffed shirts into one side of the bag, weighed them down with several pairs of shoes, then jammed three suits of clothes and a topcoat into the other side of the case. His packing completed, he snatched a picture from the wall and worked the dial of the safe behind it.

Ferron leaned against the door jamb, watching him, saying nothing.

Bennett opened the safe, then turned and looked at the big man in the doorway. His eyes reminded Ferron of the eyes of a snake he'd once seen as a child. They were elliptical, lidless, deadly.

"Don't get any ideas, Les," Bennett said. He patted the butt of the gun in his belt. "I'm leaving, as of now." He began to transfer sheaves of bills from the wall safe to the director's case. "And I'm taking this with me. All of it!"

"Did I say anything?" Ferron asked.

The former detective was grimly amused. "Not such a big shot now, are you?" He seemed almost relieved the long strain was over. "Take my advice. Get out of New York. Get as far away from it as you can." He tossed two packets of bills at Ferron's feet. "Not that you have it coming. You got us into this mess. But there's a couple of grand for plane

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fare." Bennett continued to transfer sheaves of bills from the wall safe to the case. "Me, I'm going to have myself a time. I'm going to check into the best hotel in Mexico City. I'm going to get roaring drunk. Then I'm going to tell the bellboy to bring up them little Castilian and half-breed honeys in shifts."

Ferron looked at the bills at his feet. "Two grand isn't very much money."

Bennett finished transferring the bills from the wall safe. "It's all you're going to get out of me." He closed and locked the director's case. He strapped and locked the bag. His coat was hanging on a chair. He reached for it and noticed for the first time that Ferron was wearing gloves. Bennett's hand wavered in mid-air. His voice had the same breathless quality to it that Ferron had felt ever since leaving Jim Roberts.

"Why the hell are you wearing gloves?"

Ferron took a long step into the room. "So I won't leave fingerprints."

Bennett's hand slapped the butt of the gun in his belt but before he could draw it Ferron had closed the gap between them and caught his wrist. His normally blue eyes cat-green, his breathing a harsh rasp in the close silence of the room, Ferron shoved on the wrist he was holding.

"Go ahead. Pull the trigger. Then you'll be minus more than a leg."

Sweat beaded on Bennett's forehead. "No. Now look, Les," he pleaded. "I've always shot square with you. If you think two grand isn't enough, I'll give you more. I'll give you as much as you want."

Ferron cuffed him with his free hand. "Don't bother, pal. I'll help myself."

Bennett opened his mouth to scream. Ferron clamped a gloved hand over it, still retaining his hold on the wrist of the hand that held the gun.

"I've waited a long time for this, Whit," he said quietly.

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His voice continued low. "For five years you've been telling me—go here, go there, bust this guy in the nose. Push in so and so's teeth. Break the dirty bum's arm. Mayagues is getting out of line. Go kick the yellow bastard where it hurts the most." Ferron brought up his right knee smartly. "How does it feel, Whit?"

Bennett tried to scream and couldn't because of the palm clamped over his mouth. His eyes agonized, he writhed like a live butterfly impaled on a collector's board.

Ferron was solicitous. "Not so good, huh?"

He fitted his thumb and first finger between the other man's wrist bones and squeezed. Bennett tried again, in vain, to scream. His tortured hand released the gun and it slipped through his belt and thudded on the carpet.

Ferron kicked the gun under the bed. Then releasing Bennett's wrist he doubled his gloved fingers into a fist and hit him as hard as he could. As his fist made contact with Bennett's head there was a dull plop, the same sound an overripe melon might make if it was dropped on cement. Bennett stopped writhing and stood balanced precariously. The light left his eyes. They began to glaze.

"The same as I gave Bill Roberts," Ferron panted. He kicked the other man's artificial leg out from under him. "Go ahead. Fall down."

He hit the little man again as he fell. The second blow sickened him slightly. The whiskey he'd consumed that afternoon attempted to rise past the stopper of Bromo with which he had attempted to cork it. Ferron swallowed hard a few times and looked at the motionless figure on the floor. Then, savagely, he kicked Bennett in the head, as hard as he could.

The drawn shade rustled in the slight, hot breeze. In one of the flats in the tenement building to their rear, a radio was blaring 'If It Were Up To Me.'

Ferron moved toward Bennett again and knelt beside the

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body. He felt carefully for a heartbeat, for pulse. Nothing—nothing at all.

Ferron's voice scratched his constricted throat. "Have a good time, Whit," he said.

He looked at Bennett a last time. Then picking the money filled case from the bed, he turned out the light in the bedroom and felt his way back down the stairs to the basement door. The basement seemed even darker and smelled even sourer than it had. Ferron opened the door and looked out into the yard.

The radio was still blaring 'If It Were Up To Me.' Most of the open windows of the tenement backing on the fence were lighted. In one window four men were playing cards around a kitchen table. In another an excessively fat woman, wearing only a slip, was ironing. On the floor above her a teen-age girl, wearing even less than the fat woman, was proving her love for her boy friend. Or helping to pay the rent. Ferron had no way of knowing. He watched the couple a moment, amused, then picked his way through the refuse in the yard to the fence.

It was after ten o'clock by the time he reached the lot where he had left his car. It was the first time in years that he had walked so far. His face was red with his exertion. His back and sides and shoulders were drenched with perspiration. The director's case at the end of his arm felt like so much lead.

Standing in the shadows across the street, Ferron waited until the attendant drove out to deliver a car. When the man was gone he crossed the street and locked the director's case in the trunk of the yellow Cadillac. Then lighting a cigarette with fingers that still shook slightly, he whistled his way down the walk toward the apartment building in which Lydia lived.

The red-haired girl was glad to see him. She snuggled into his arms as she kissed him. "I knew you'd come tonight, Les. You *do* love me, don't you?"

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Ferron buried his face in the fragrance of her expensive perfume. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Lydia touched his shirt. "Why you're soaking wet, honey."

"It's hot outside," Ferron said. He took off his coat and shirt and undershirt and laid them on a chair. "I'll want a cold shower." He opened the small portable bar in one corner of the room. "But first I want a drink."

He poured a water glass half full of rye and gulped it.

Lydia was concerned. "There's nothing wrong, is there, Les?"

Ferron forced a smile. "No more than usual. I spent half the afternoon trying to argue a guy out of making a complaint against Whit."

"Successfully?"

"No. He's already written a letter to the D.A." Ferron sat on the sofa and pulled her down on his lap. "Be good to me tonight, baby. Get stinko with your old man. It can be all hell will pop in the morning."

He held the re-filled glass to her lips. She drank obediently. "Whatever you say, sweetheart."

"You love me, huh?"

"You know I do."

"How much?"

"I'd sleep with the devil for you."

Ferron was amused. "I doubt if it will come to that." He finished the whiskey Lydia had left in the glass.

She made herself comfortable on his lap and sat twisting the blond hair on his chest into minature mountain peaks. "There *isn't* any other woman, is there, Les?"

Ferron stopped being amused and was annoyed. "For God's sake, no. Why do you keep harping on that?"

She told him. "Because I love you."

"Oh. Yeah. Love," Ferron said.

He sat wondering how much there was in the director's case. There should be plenty. Whit had spent a lot of money

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on women and rye and singing. On the other hand, as best as he had been able to estimate, the little man had been netting better than four thousand dollars a month. There might even be as much as a hundred thousand dollars in the case. And Whit had thrown him two grand.

A late edition of one of the evening papers was lying on the sofa. Still holding Lydia in his lap, Ferron turned to the race results.

Lydia continued to build mountain peaks. "You'd better shower, honey. You're all over sweaty."

"In a minute," Ferron said. He found the fourth and then the sixth race and swore softly under his breath.

"Now what?" Lydia asked.

Ferron was indignant. "The dirty crooks scratched both my horses."

Chapter Seven

FERRON LAY ON HIS BACK in the heat sodden room, blowing smoke at the ceiling, enjoying Lydia's soft breathing, the muffled purr of traffic on the street eight floors below, and the various and assorted night noises as the city composed itself for sleep.

He felt relaxed and replete and complete. It was an effort to lift his arm to look at the luminous dial of his watch. When he did it was five minutes of two, time for him to get on his horse.

He eased his bulk to the side of the bed, then realized he was being foolish. It would be late morning before Lydia awakened. He looked down at the girl. She lay in careless abandon, a faint smile on her lips as she slept, utterly spent and relaxed, her breath fragrant with the whiskey she'd drunk.

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Ferron touched her to make certain. The girl arched her white body automatically. She made sleepy-kitten sounds in her throat, but continued to sleep. Ferron was amused. He thought of the phrase in the primer.

This is a picture of a kitty. A kitty is a small cat. What does the kitty say? The kitty says meow.

The big blond man padded naked into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face and chest. He put on his socks and shorts and shoes and wiped the wash basin, the top of the flush bowl, and the tile and the knobs of the shower with a towel, then had to rewash his hands.

The bedroom needed no attention. He had been careful not to touch anything, anything but Lydia. And the bureau of identification couldn't very well process her for fingerprints.

He picked up the glasses they'd used from the coffee table in the living room, washed them in the kitchenette and set them upside down on the sink to drain. He debated wiping the second bottle of rye he'd opened and took a big drink while he debated the matter. He would take the rye with him for one last drink. It might be a long time before he had another.

He put on his pants and undershirt and shirt and coat. The garments were still wet with perspiration. Even in the hot silence of the room they felt cold and clammy. Dressed, he thrust the fifth of rye into his coat pocket, picked up the paper he'd read, folded it neatly under one arm, then wiped the phone and the arms of the sofa and the knob of the portable bar and anything else he might have touched.

When he was finally satisfied that he had removed every trace of Les Ferron he walked back to the bedroom for a last look at Lydia. She was a nice kid. He almost wished he could take her with him. Still, biologically speaking, all women were the same. In a few weeks, two weeks at the most, he would be enjoying Amy. The thought of her vir-

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ginal dewiness excited him. She had everything that Lydia had, with a lot less miles on it. It would be fun breaking her in, demonstrating the fundamentals of the Biblical injunction to beget and be fruitful.

With a last look around the room he walked to the front door, opened it with his handkerchief, then remembered the bottle of rye that he and Lydia had killed. He found it under the sofa and carrying it with him out into the hall dropped it down the incinerator chute.

The doorman was leaning against the front of the hotel. He sprang to alert attention. "You want me to get your car, Mr. Ferron?"

Ferron shook his head. "Don't bother. It's just that I can't sleep. I'll probably be back in an hour or two, but I thought I'd take a little ride."

"It's a swell night for it," the doorman said.

A new attendant was on duty at the lot. Ferron gave him the claim check for his car, paid the small charge due, and drove out of the lot. Even at two o'clock in the morning there were still a scattering of people on the stoops.

He drove west to the Express Highway, then north to the George Washington Bridge. There was some traffic on the elevated highway, but not much. Most of it was outbound. Ferron had thought he might be nervous. He wasn't. He felt perfectly composed.

There was even less traffic on the west side of the bridge. He drove on into Fort Lee without incident and into the unlighted garage of the suburban house on the outskirts.

He closed the door and turned on the light. The Plymouth looked even shabbier and more ancient than it had. Ferron locked the garage door and drank from the neck of the bottle as he looked at Paul Parrish's car. It was a heap. A wry smile twisted his lips. No one but a Holy Joe or an itinerant peddler of Bibles and religious objets d' art would drive such a piece of junk.

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He took off his coat and untied his tie, then stripped completely and put the clothes he took off into one of the smart traveling bags in the yellow car. The director's case intrigued him. One thing was certain. He hadn't been wrong in his estimation of seven no trump, doubled and redoubled. There was nothing in the bag but money and most of the packets had been sheaves of fifty and one hundred dollar bills.

For a moment he was tempted to say to hell with Paul Parrish and Amy and New Hope, and take off. He knew he was being foolish even as he was tempted. Once Whit's body was found the hounds would begin to howl. Individually they might be dumb. Collectively they couldn't be beaten. He doubted if he could get out of the limits of the continental United States.

Reluctantly Ferron drew on the coarse cheap socks and underwear that Paul Parrish wore. They smelled sour. So did the blue serge suit.

He could feel his face change as he dressed. His lips firmed and grew thin. He could feel his cheeks sink in. His jutting jaw receded. Sometime tomorrow he'd get a haircut with plenty of clipper on both sides of his temples. That would make his naturally large ears look even larger and the last of Les Ferron would be swept up by the porter's broom.

"'*Blessed art the meek,*'" he quoted smugly, "'*for they shall inherit the earth.*'"

The smugness left Ferron's face. He took a second drink, perturbed by a new and seemingly insoluble problem. He had intended to leave the Cadillac on the streets of Fort McCoy or Leonia or Coytesville as a yellow herring for the hounds to bark at. But if he drove the car into any of the three towns he'd have no way of getting back to the Plymouth except by taxi. And hackers had good memories. Any chump would remember a fare he picked up at two-thirty in the morning, any fare dressed as he was dressed.

He fought a desire to take a third drink. Les Ferron had

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had his last drink for some weeks or some months to come. He was Paul Parrish now. And the psalm-singing peddler of Bibles abjured, abhorred, and abstained from all alcoholic beverages. The smug bastard had even popped up in a pepper pot prayer meeting and so testified.

On the other hand there was no real reason why his car should be found. If it disappeared with him the big eyes working on Whit Bennett's murder would be even more mystified. He'd paid the rent on the house and garage for a year in advance. The year still had six months to go. If he left the yellow Cadillac where it was, it would disappear with Les Ferron, for six months at least. The thought amused Ferron. It would serve the finance company right for hounding him as they had about the payments.

He picked up an oily rag from the work bench and wiped the Cadillac inside and out. He wiped the wheel and the spokes and the dash board and both of the suitcases filled with clothes. He paid special attention to the rear-vision mirror and the inside and outside of the glove compartment. As he worked he noticed the gray silk dress gloves were stained with Whit's blood. He must remember to throw them away, along with the bottle and rag and Les Ferron's wallet and identification papers.

It was hot and close in the garage. Ferron was wet with sweat when he finished wiping the Cadillac and put the oily rag beside the bottle of rye in the front seat of the Plymouth.

Next he transferred the few hundred in cash he had on hand from Les Ferron's smart cordovan wallet to the cheap plastic affair that Paul Parrish used. As he did, he rechecked Paul Parrish's identity cards.

There was a small photostatic copy of his Army discharge, a New York State driver's license, an automobile insurance identification card, a library card from the public library in Palisades Falls, a dog-eared copy of his teacher's certificate, and a business card introducing him as a representative of

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the King James Publishing Society. He returned Parrish's wallet to his pocket and laid the cordovan wallet beside the rag and whiskey bottle.

He'd done what he could do. The rest was up to the gods. He opened the door of the garage and stepped on the starter of the Plymouth. There was a dull click. He tried again and the click was repeated.

Sweat beading on his forehead, Ferron got out of the car, closed the garage door, and lifted the battered hood of the Plymouth. He was relieved to find the source of the trouble. The ancient, greasy battery cable had jolted off its terminals. He replaced it, getting his gloves liberally smeared with grease in the process. When he stepped on the starter again the motor turned over reluctantly, pooping like a two cylinder outboard motor.

Ferron peeled off his gloves and laid them with the things to be thrown away. He opened the garage door. He backed the Plymouth out. He closed and locked the door, making certain he didn't leave a clear fingerprint on either the door or the lock.

Sweat was blinding him. The tight stiff collar made breathing difficult. He tried to ease it and smeared it and his face with grease that the gloves had left on the wheel. So? Paul Parrish didn't care how he looked. Paul Parrish had put aside those things that were vain.

He drove back through Fort Lee. On the far side of the black water the staggered skyline of New York was outlined boldly against the moon. Ferron hated to see it drop behind him. New York had been good to him. He'd had a good time in New York.

He thought of Lydia and laughed. She would be fit to be tied in the morning. She'd call him everything she could think of. Still, when the big eyes questioned her, there wasn't a thing she could tell them. Ferron laughed even louder. His spending most of the night with Lydia would still further

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confuse the issue. The police wouldn't know what to think.

He drove on steadily, as fast as the car would go, a modest thirty-five miles an hour. Ten miles past the bridge he dropped the oily rag from the car. Ten miles still farther on he dropped one of the gloves. An hour out of Fort Lee he wiped the bottle with the remaining glove and dropped the bottle on the pavement. There was a satisfactory crash.

Two hours, then three hours, passed. Dawn wasn't far away when he pulled over onto the shoulder of the road, extracted Les Ferron's identity cards from their glassine envelopes in the wallet and tore them into minute shreds which he spread over another five miles of highway. Now all that remained was the wallet and one glove.

Ferron waited until he came to a culvert he remembered and dropped the wallet into the swiftly flowing stream cascading down the hillside to join the river. He was sorry to see the wallet go. It was an expensive wallet. It had brought him good luck from the night he'd pinched it from a drunken civilian employee at the separation center in L.A.

The trees were beginning to brighten and the birds to sing as he dropped the second glove. His set smile grew even more smug. Let the law find him now. If he should happen to be picked up, the law couldn't prove a thing. Les Ferron had ceased to exist. He was Paul Parrish, son of the late Tom Parrish, former soldier and rural school teacher and current itinerant peddler of the authorized King James version of the Holy Bible, as translated out of the original tongues.

Traffic increased with the growing dawn. State patrol cars passed him twice, one going the other way, one headed the same way he was.

With full dawn, reaction and fatigue set in. Ferron's hands shook on the wheel. He wanted a drink. He wanted a cigarette. He wished to Christ the whole thing was over and he was wherever he was going to head for after he'd tumbled Amy and conned old man Wayne.

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A tinkling sound annoyed him. Ferron tried to locate it and couldn't. It was lost among the rattles and piston slap and squeaking of the car. He tried the lock of the glove compartment. He tried the handles that rolled up the windows. Then he realized what it was and swore softly. It was his wrist on the steering wheel. He was still wearing the platinum wrist watch Lydia had given him, and it was worth more than his stock and car.

"Anything?" he'd taunted Lydia.

"I've already done that," she'd told him. *"Where do you think your thousand dollar wrist watch came from?"*

There were cars in front and in back of him now. His hands shaking so badly it was almost impossible for him to drive, Ferron swung into a scenic turn-out overlooking the river and sat a moment, motionless, until his panic subsided.

Then getting out of the car he slipped the watch from his wrist. The back of it was inscribed, *With All My Love, From Lydia to Les.*

Ferron wiped the watch on the skirt of his coat, waited for a lull in traffic, then hurled the watch as far as he could. Here the banks of the river were sheer. The watch twinkled silver in the growing sun, then made a small splash as it struck the water.

Ferron brushed the palms of his hands together. A lot Lydia loved him. The goddam little red-haired tart might have gotten him electrocuted.

Nine o'clock found him out of the hills in gently rolling farm country. The speedometer of the Plymouth had long since ceased to work, but as closely as he could calculate he was at least two hundred miles from Fort Lee.

A hearty breakfast resting easy in his stomach, Ferron studied the country around him. It was as good as any. Reaching over the back of the front seat he took a large and rather garish Bible from a carton and laid it on the seat beside him. He called it his large economy family size

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and made three dollars and seventy-five cents on each one he sold at eight dollars.

The name on the next mail box he came to was Barnes. The tree-shaded house was set well back from the road at the end of a tree-shaded lane. Ferron swung into the lane and, from past experience, drove around to the back stoop. By this time of morning, farm wives had gotten the children off to school, made their beds and washed their breakfast dishes, and could usually be found baking, washing the cream separator, or rocking on the cool of the back stoop, catching up with their mending as they rested.

A black and white dog yapped at the car as he braked it. A flock of Rhode Island Reds clucked out of his way, then resumed pecking at the shelled corn that had been scattered around the back stoop. The screen door of the frame house opened and a graying woman with wet, work-reddened hands came out on the stoop and looked at him suspiciously.

Still seated in the car, Ferron took off his black felt hat.

"Good morning, Mrs. Barnes. I represent—"

"We don't want any," the woman said. "Whatever it is you're selling, we don't want any."

Ferron continued to smile. "I don't think you understood me, Mrs. Barnes. I'm not actually selling anything. I represent the King James Publishing Society and what I am really doing is just trying to spread the Word." He held up the large, garish Bible. "But of course you have a family Bible. It may be getting a little old and dog-eared and hard to read—most of the old fashioned small print is—but you *do* have a Bible."

The woman bobbed her head. "Oh, yes. Of course."

Ferron got out of his car, still smiling. "Then you wouldn't be interested. But while I'm here, Mrs. Barnes, I wonder if I might show you this new edition, large size print, completely illustrated Bible that my firm has just had printed at a great sacrifice to themselves. We might even read a

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passage or two together. As it is truly said in Proverbs, twenty-four, verse ten, 'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.' "

The farm woman was embarrassed. "Well, now, I don't know. I didn't mean to be sharp with you. But even livin' out here on a back road, you've no idea how plagued we are with peddlers. And of course I had no way of knowing what you were selling."

Ferron shook his finger at her. "Ah ah." His wide smile broadened. "I'm not selling a thing, Mrs. Barnes. You can't sell salvation. All I am doing is spreading the Word."

Mrs. Barnes was even more embarrassed. "Of course." She finished drying her hands on her apron and opened the screen door. "Won't you come in, please, Mr.—I don't believe I caught your name."

"Parrish. Paul Parrish," Ferron told her.

Chapter Eight

FRIDAY WAS LONG IN COMING. Ferron was glad to see it come. He called it a week at three o'clock. At four o'clock he checked out of the small hotel in Catskill at which he had spent the night and drove slowly south on U. S. 9W toward the Falls.

It hadn't been a bad week. He'd pushed nineteen large Bibles, eight small ones, fourteen simulated leather bound hymnals, and twelve framed religious mottos.

Ferron calculated his profit as he drove. The nineteen large Bibles had netted him $71.25. The small Bibles added eight dollars more to the total. With the hymnals and the mottos, the total came to $93.75. That wasn't too bad a week's take. And he still didn't know how much there was in

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the director's case under the carton of Bibles in the trunk of the laboring Plymouth.

If only he knew what was happening in New York. The big eyes were playing this one cagey. There'd been nothing in any of the newspapers he'd read, except the bare facts. Whit Bennett, a former New York detective, who in recent years had operated a small loan office in Harlem, had been found beaten to death in his bedroom. There'd been no mention of Ferron, and that fact worried him.

He looked at himself in the rear-vision mirror. The soup bowl haircut he'd gotten in Purling Top made his naturally large ears as obvious as Marilyn Monroe's best features. The pious patter he'd prattled all week showed in his face.

Ferron sighed as he shifted into second gear to climb a small hill, a hill that the yellow Cadillac would have flattened out like a packet of book matches. More, he felt even worse than he looked. He hadn't known a man could miss anything like he missed the cigarette normally dangling from his lower lip. The closest he'd come to a drink had been the thimble full of elderberry wine with which a skittish widow on a rural route out of Norton Hill had attempted to seduce him. The hell of it was this could go on for weeks, possibly months. Even after he and Amy were married he wouldn't dare to smoke or drink. True, there would be other compensations.

He ate supper in a combination restaurant and gas station forty miles from the Falls, glancing through a New York morning paper as he ate. Unable to make any progress in the Bennett case, the police had fallen back on the old dodge of predicting an early arrest.

The potatoes were soggy with grease. His hamburger steak was overdone. The pale amber fluid in his cup tasted more like tea than coffee. Ferron drove on through the growing dark fighting a bad case of heartburn. The thing for him to do, he decided, was to marry Amy as soon as was agreeable

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to her. That way at least he wouldn't die of indigestion before he could get his hands on old man Wayne's money and take off.

When he'd driven Amy home Sunday night, she had asked, "When are we going to be married, Paul?"

He'd told her, "Soon."

"This summer?" she had asked.

"Yes. Some time this summer," he'd promised.

Then Amy had said, "I'm glad. So glad. If only you knew how much I love you, Paul, how much I want to be your wife."

Ferron could still feel her hot small hand on his thigh. So what was he waiting for? He'd even told Mrs. Harvey he might be married this weekend. He'd move out of his room in the Falls tonight and check into the Inn in New Hope. And Sunday, or on whatever day Amy decided on, they could be married.

Just thinking of possessing the black-haired girl excited him. He pushed the accelerator of the aged Plymouth to the floor boards. If there was any difference he couldn't notice it. The car chugged on at a noisy thirty miles an hour. It got worse every day. One of the bearings wasn't getting oil. He'd have to have the heap fixed soon or throw a rod.

It was eight o'clock when he reached the Falls. Mrs. Harvey, as always, was glad to see him, pleased to hear he was being married, but sorry to hear he was moving to the Inn in New Hope. She insisted he bring his bride to see her and Ferron promised that he would.

Alone in his small second floor room, Ferron drew the shade, washed his face and hands, and put on a clean stiff collar. Then, on the pretense of repacking his car, he carried in the carton of Bibles covering the saddle leather director's case, and did what he'd wanted to do all week.

The case was new. The lock was strong. Ferron was finally forced to cut the leather with the old fashioned straight-edge

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razor that Paul Parrish affected. He made certain he'd locked his door, then counted the bills by packet. His face was beaded with sweat when he finished. He'd done much better than he'd dared hope. If he had counted the packets correctly, and he believed he had, there was approximately $127,000 in the case. The one-legged little bum had really raked it in.

Ferron started at a rap on his door. "Yes?"

"I just wondered, Mr. Parrish," Mrs. Harvey said, "if you'd care to join me in a dish of fresh made strawberry shortcake and a cup of tea, sort of in celebration of you gettin' married an' leavin' tonight, an' all."

"I'll be glad to," Ferron lied. "I'll be right down as soon as I finish shaving and wipe the soap off my face."

He sat a moment after she had gone, wiping the perspiration from his face with the hem of the sheet. There were so many little things that could trip a man. If the old biddy had walked in and seen the money on the bed there would have been no way he could explain it. From now on the money stayed in the car, or in some safe hiding place in New Hope, until he was ready to take off. He knew how much he had now. If old man Wayne should prove obstinate, if for some reason he couldn't con the old man, it wouldn't matter greatly. As soon as he was positive the heat on Les Ferron, if there was any heat on Les Ferron, had died down, he would take off for Santa Fé De Bogotá as his first stop. The name had a musical sound. A lad he'd soldiered with had once spent six months there. And the way Kelly had told it the mountain city was a paradise on earth. Prices were cheap. The food was good. And the native senoritas were both lush and over-trusting.

Thinking about them made Ferron think of Shirley. It was a shame he hadn't been able to do anything about her. The dead Negro's widow was a tasty tidbit and, if Ferron was any judge of women, straight out of the frying pan. She

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would probably marry Jim Roberts, at least shack up with him. No man in full possession of all his faculties could continue to sleep on a sagging leather couch with an animated mattress like Shirley on the other side of a thin door.

Ferron considered the mutilated director's case. It was his last link with Whit. More, now that he'd cut it open, it was useless as a receptacle for the money. He'd have to get rid of the case on his way to New Hope. He knew just the spot for it.

He stacked the packets of bills carefully on the bottom of the large cardboard container in which the Bibles had been shipped, and piled the Bibles on top of it. It would be safe in the trunk of his car. The good folk of New Hope took their commandments literally. *Thou shalt not steal* meant just that. They even went a step farther. *Thou shalt not pry* was an unspoken commandment.

The Bibles repacked, he went downstairs and ate a huge dish of shortcake that he didn't want. Mrs. Harvey was familiar with New Hope, but not with its inhabitants. Being a woman, she was curious. She wanted to know the name of the girl he was marrying and where he intended to stay until they were married.

The shortcake added to his heartburn. He sat bored, wishing he had a cigarette, while the kindly old woman insisted on giving him a hand-holding-by-hand-holding, kiss-by-kiss description of the courtship of herself and the late Mr. Harvey.

It was nine o'clock before he could get away. Back in his car he drove on down U.S. 9W toward the turnoff into the hills that led back to New Hope. The car seemed even slower and noisier than it had. He drove in a constant blare of horns and blinking of headlights as the rapidly moving southbound traffic swung out and drove around him.

A half mile from the turnoff Ferron winced and closed his eyes momentarily as a siren sounded behind him. A red light

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began to revolve, and a state patrol car pulled up beside him and its driver motioned him over onto the shoulder of the road.

Ferron forced himself to be calm. It *had* to be a minor matter. He'd passed through a stop sign or violated some inconsequential traffic regulation. No one but himself knew that he and Les Ferron were the same man. Besides, if the police were looking for him some smart reporter would have ferreted out a story and spread it all over the front page of his rag.

The trooper walked back from the parked patrol car and stood a moment just looking at the Plymouth. When he did speak he said:

"What's your name?"

"Parrish," Ferron said. "Paul Parrish."

"Let's see your license."

Ferron fumbled his cheap wallet from his pocket and attempted to pass it through the rolled down window.

"Take it out of your wallet," the trooper said.

Ferron took Paul Parrish's driver's license from its glassine case in the fat, bill-stuffed wallet and handed it to the trooper. The trooper studied it under the beam of his flashlight and handed it back.

"Okay, Parrish," he said. "You ever hear that slow drivers were supposed to keep to the right hand side of the road?"

Ferron nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then see you do," the trooper said. "That crate of yours is blocking traffic all the way back to Coxsackie. I clocked you at twenty-six, and you hugging the center line, all the way from Catskill. And another thing—"

Ferron continued meek. "Yes, sir?"

"What do you do for a living?"

"I sell Bibles."

"You what?"

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"I sell Bibles." Ferron added, "Also hymnals and religious mottos and pictures."

"I see," the trooper said. "How's business?"

"Good," Ferron smiled. "Very good."

"How good?"

"I made ninety-three dollars and ninety-five cents this week."

The trooper pushed his hat back on his head. "Come again. You made *how* much?"

"Ninety-three dollars and ninety-five cents."

"Selling Bibles?"

"Yes, sir."

The trooper straightened his hat. "I seem to be in the wrong business. Look. Let me give you a tip, fellow."

"Yes, sir."

"If you're making that kind of dough, either buy a new heap or get this thing fixed up. Right now, I could give you four tickets. One for a burned out taillight. One for not having a rear bumper. One for not having a light on your license plate. And one for driving a car that's a menace to life and property. If it's any of my business, what are you going to do with all your money, fellow?"

Ferron grinned at him. "I'm getting married this week."

The trooper returned his grin. "I see. Well, I know how that is. A fellow wants a little extra in the sock. But what I said still goes. Either get this heap fixed or junk it and buy a new one. And whatever you do, don't take the bride-to-be on her honeymoon in this thing. If you do, the chances are it won't last long. I mean the honeymoon."

Ferron continued to grin. "Yes, sir."

The trooper looked at the Plymouth again, shook his head, and strode back to the patrol car.

The grin on Ferron's face turned smug. He waited until the trooper had driven on, then meshed the ancient car into gear. He was glad the incident had happened. It added to his

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self confidence. Each new contact he made as Paul Parrish was another spadeful of dirt on the unmourned grave of Les Ferron.

It was after ten when he reached New Hope. There were still a few cars and farm trucks parked under the shade of the elms. The two general stores were still dimly lighted but with the exception of an equally dim light in the Inn, the rest of the town was dark. Ferron debated driving on out to the Wayne farm and decided against it. Both Amy and her father would be asleep and he wouldn't be able to awaken Amy without awakening her father. Morning would be time enough to drive out to the farm.

He smirked at the thought of his reception. Both Amy and old man Wayne would be pleased to learn he was stopping at the Inn. They would be even more pleased to learn that he had gotten his business affairs in order and he and Amy could be married on any day the girl set. Ferron looked at the unlighted main street with distaste. He hoped it would be soon. He couldn't take too much of this.

He drove on toward the Inn, then was struck by a happy thought. Cigarettes and cigars were of the devil, but plug cut didn't come under the same heading. Even old man Wayne chewed incessantly. He'd never chewed before but it was possible that a cud of tobacco would assuage his almost overpowering desire for a cigarette.

He parked in front of one of the general stores and crossed the walk. Young Swinton, with a group of other stay-up-late young devils, was sitting on the bench in front of the store.

"I see you're back," Swinton said.

Ferron started to say, "That seems obvious," and changed his mind. He doubted if the young farmer would understand what he meant. Besides, it was out of character. Instead, he just said, "Yes. I am."

Swinton glowered at him. "Well, what I said last week still goes."

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Ferron stopped and looked at him. "You mean when you warned me not to play high, wide, and handsome with Amy. Because if I did—and may He excuse me for taking His name in vain but it was your saying, not mine—because if I did you'd 'beat my goddam head in and feed my rotten guts to your hogs.' "

Swinton's face flooded with color. "What I said was betwixt you and me."

Ferron shook his head. "No. Taking His name in vain is His business. And I've been heartsick about it all week. I've prayed for you every night."

Young Swinton's companions edged away from him. His face still red, he said, "Don't bother."

"But I shall," Ferron said earnestly. "I shall pray for you again tonight, and every night. But if it will set your mind at ease, Ira, you may as well know right now what all of New Hope will know in the morning. Amy and I, God willing, are to be married just as soon as she sets the date."

He walked on into the store leaving Swinton livid behind him. That should hold the bastard, Ferron thought. Aloud, he greeted the storekeeper by name and bought a villainous looking plug of chewing tobacco.

Mr. Hackensacker was sympathetic. "Jest about t' lock up," he said. "But I know how 'tis, Mr. Parrish. Women kin call it a dirty habit and the parson kin preach again' it." He spat an amber stream at the sand box beside the counter. "But a man's jist got t' have his chaw. Shucks, even a cow has its cud."

He laughed uproariously at his own joke and Ferron was forced to laugh with him. He doubted if the plug of tobacco was worth it.

Swinton was gone from the bench when Ferron walked back to his car. He drove on through the silence to the Inn.

He made certain the trunk of his car was locked and started into the Inn only to stop at the sight of a big black

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car with New York license plates that was parked to one side of the door.

He realized he was breathing through his mouth and forced himself to breathe normally. He had to get over his jumpiness. This starting at shadows had to stop. He wasn't Les Ferron any more. He was Paul Parrish. And Paul Parrish, as yet, had done nothing more illegal than drive a car that was, in the words of the state trooper, a menace to life and property.

He walked on into the Inn. It smelled sour, of dry rot and faulty plumbing. The original guests, no doubt, had used bowls and pitchers and chamber pots, and the small sheds in back of the Inn that now housed the innkeeper's chickens. The plumbing, such as it was, was strictly an afterthought.

A slim, rather pretty girl in her late teens or early twenties was standing at the foot of the stairs leading up to the second floor while a well-dressed man of thirty-odd was talking earnestly to old Si Jepson who ran the Inn. As Ferron walked up to the desk, the man said:

"But you *must* have a room. It's late and my wife is tired. I can't drive on into New York tonight."

"Sorry," Jepson said. "I'm full up. Hain't got a room in the Inn."

The man started to argue, shrugged instead, picked up the bag at his feet and walked back to where the girl was standing. "We'll have to drive on, honey," he told her. "Anyway to the next town, unless one of the motels on 9W happens to have a vacancy."

"But why can't we stay here?" she wanted to know.

Her companion told her: "He *says* he hasn't a room."

Ferron set down the battered paper suitcase he was carrying. "That puts me in rather a bad spot, Si."

"Why?" the old man asked him.

Ferron said, wryly, "I intended to stay the night. In fact I intended to stay until Amy and I are married."

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Jepson swung the dog-eared register around. "Glad t' have you, Mr. Parrish. Glad t' git the business."

Ferron looked over his shoulder at the departing couple. "But I thought you were full up."

The old man winked at him. "That was jist a story I told. Ain't got but one room rented. An' that t' a drummer for dog food." The old man was indignant. "You ever hear the like? As effen dogs had t' have a special food of their own 'stead of eatin' the scraps from the table."

There was a late edition New York paper lying on the counter. Ferron picked it up. "But I don't see—"

Jepson confided. "It was that paper that give 'em away. They ain't goin' into New York. They're a comin' out. Weren't married, see? But I could have told without the paper. When you bin in the Inn business as long as I have you git so you kin spot 'em right off. The girl always acts too cool." The old man was indignant. "The nerve of them a tryin' t' git away with that in my hotel. I let one fornicatin' couple in an' the first thing you know, bein' as close t' New York an' the main highway as we are, I'd be runnin' a regular Sodden Gomorrah."

Ferron didn't bother to correct him. Sodom had, undoubtedly, been sodden. He picked up the key the old man laid on the counter and carried his paper suitcase up to the front room he always occupied when he stopped at the Inn.

There was a bed, a dresser, a wash bowl, and a chair. An unshaded 25-watt bulb hung from the high ceiling at the end of a long length of green cord. The three pieces of furniture were massive. The room smelled musty. Despite the almost stifling heat the bed clothes felt damp. Ferron swatted at a mosquito that had found its way in through the rusted screen, then threw back the patchwork quilt and yellowed sheet to air the bed.

As he did he realized he was still holding the newspaper he'd picked up. He tossed it on the bed and took off his coat

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and shirt and undershirt. He wanted a cold shower but didn't have the energy to wrestle with the eccentricities of the ancient water pipes in the equally ancient bathroom in the hall.

Instead of attempting to bathe he sat on the edge of the bed eyeing the plug of chewing tobacco dubiously. He didn't like the looks of it. He gnawed a small fragment of tobacco from the plug, chewed it industriously for a few seconds, then spat it into the waste basket. It tasted even worse than it looked. Attempting to chew tobacco was worse than going without cigarettes. He'd just have to go without.

He walked to the window and looked out into the night. It was so black, so silent; there was so much of it. Restless, he returned to the sway-backed bed and sat on the edge of it. The paper that the disappointed would-be fornicator had left on the counter was a fairly late edition tabloid.

Ferron's restlessness left him as he opened it. The police had stopped being cagey. The whole thing was out in the open now.

It was established that Whit had been a loan shark. At least fifty of the men and women in debt to him had so testified. A certain Les Ferron, believed to have been Whit's strong arm man, was wanted for questioning. He was described as big and blond, a flashy dresser who drove a late model yellow Cadillac convertible. The description would fit any man who was big and blond and could afford to drive a Cadillac.

Whit's body had been found at ten o'clock on Tuesday morning by the drab who cleaned and cooked for him. The wall safe in his bedroom had been opened. There was evidence he'd been robbed but the only fingerprints found on the safe were the dead man's own fingerprints and the police had no idea how much money the killer might have gotten.

To date the police had only one suspect. Ferron read, then re-read, the passage.

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Technical Sergeant James Roberts, recently returned from Korea, and brother of a William Roberts who died in an attempted mugging some six months ago, has been arrested on suspicion of murder. According to Lieutenant Davis, who is in charge of the investigation, the veteran admits writing a letter to the District Attorney accusing Bennett of complicity in his brother's death and was also overheard threatening to 'beat in Bennett's brains.' Roberts contends, however, that he was sleeping off a drunk in his sister-in-law's Harlem apartment during the time of the murder but, being alone in the apartment, has no way to substantiate his alibi.

Ferron read the paragraph a third time and began to laugh. Of course. Shirley had been bathing preparatory to going to work when Roberts had passed out on the couch. She'd already taken the baby to the lady downstairs. And once the pretty colored girl had left to do whatever she did there was no possible way that the big sergeant could prove that he had stayed in the apartment.

Ferron's laughter continued to mount. He beat on the bed with his fists. He laughed until he was weak, until tears rolled down his cheeks. He'd never read anything so funny. He'd never been so amused.

Who knew? It could be that Roberts would burn.

Chapter Nine

FERRON FELT LIKE HE WAS MOVING in slow motion through a heated vacuum. What breeze there was came from the south. It drifted a flock of fleecy white clouds across the sky like so many sleepy lambs, but did nothing to dispel the heat.

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It was two weeks since it had rained. The wilted leaves of the elm and oak and hard-maple trees bordering the hayfield fluttered in the faint breeze but the shade they cast was only an illusion of coolness. Even the lake, on the fourth side of the field, normally a deep blue, had taken on the appearance of molten brass.

Ferron eyed the handle of the pitchfork he was using with distaste. He should have continued to sell Bibles. It had been a mistake on his part to offer to spend this last week of celibacy helping old man Wayne put up his hay. He scowled at the old man on the other side of the hay rack. He might have known the tight fisted old bastard would jump at the chance to get a good hand for nothing.

The week just past had only two things in its favor. One, it was almost over. The other was Amy. Ferron glanced up at the girl driving the team of horses hitched to the big hay rack that he and Wayne were loading. Even Amy was a mixed blessing. Whenever the hot breeze caught the skirt of the full but simple gray dress that she was wearing, he could catch a tantalizing glimpse of satin smooth young thighs ending in a froth of lacy underthings. The hell of it was he couldn't do anything but pant like a fifteen-year-old farm boy abusing himself in an outhouse. Nor would he be able to do anything until tomorrow night.

The thought amused Ferron. It was obvious the sect's abjuration of worldly vanities didn't extend to its women's undergarments. They didn't believe in radios or television. They didn't believe in newspapers or magazines. It was wrong to drink or smoke or gamble. It was evil to go to a movie, a play, or a dance. Their exterior garments were sober, bordering on somber. But it was perfectly all right for its women to wear sheer nylon home made, lace-edged pants.

Ferron glanced up at the promised land. Either that or Amy was cheating and trying on some of her trousseau for size. It had been a busy week for her. When she hadn't been

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helping him and her father in the fields, she'd been sewing. Since Monday afternoon, shortly after he'd asked her to set a date for their wedding and she had named the coming Sunday, the old stone house had been filled with her friends, sewing, giggling, piecing, patching, helping her to assemble the sheets and towels and fancy quilts and other household articles that she would need in her own home.

Old man Wayne, breathing heavily from exertion, studied the load with critical eyes. "Better build up that back edge a bit, Paul."

"Yes, sir," Ferron said meekly.

He jammed his fork into the hay cock on which he was working and tossed a fork of fragrant hay onto the back corner of the load. It was still a little low. Ferron built it up with a forkful few men could even lift. Farming was duck soup. Any fool could do it. Ferron thought he would rather enjoy it if it wasn't so much work.

Old man Wayne nodded his approval. "Thou art a good worker, Paul. And Amy and I are very blessed that thou art to be her husband and my son."

You should know, you old fool, Ferron thought.

He wiped the sweat from his face with his arm and tantalized himself by looking up at Amy before attacking the next hay cock. There was a little bit of bitch in every woman. Amy knew what she was doing to him. High on top of the load, the black-haired girl smiled down at him.

"It's not too late to back out, Paul."

"I'll take a chance," Ferron said. "Columbus did. And look what he discovered."

Both Amy and her father laughed far heartier than the hoary joke warranted. Ferron shook his head as he moved on with the rack to the next hay cock.

The New Hopers were a funny lot. They didn't fall into the category of any other sect he'd ever heard of. They were willing to salute the flag. They did so on every possible

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occasion. There was a flag on their pulpit. The young men registered for the draft or enlisted before they were drafted. They marched away and fought wars in all the odd corners of the world. Even old man Wayne had been a much decorated infantry sergeant in World War I. But when they returned to New Hope they put all worldly vanities aside with the uniforms they had worn. If it wasn't in the Book, it wasn't so. Their moral code was simple and, for the most part, contained in Exodus, Chapter 20, passages 3 through 17. Nor could they see any improvement in the ramifications of modern day law over the crude but effective punitive passages in Exodus 21, that read:

> 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.'

A girl came to her husband a maiden. A man neither worshiped false idols nor went whoring after strange gods. White was white. Black was black. There was no divorce. The purpose of marriage was to beget and be fruitful.

Chaff sifted down Ferron's back. The hot stubble burned through the thick soles of the cheap soles he was wearing. Several of the blisters on his palm had broken. He might eventually tan but despite a week spent under the sun all his fair skin had done was become more sunburned.

He was both pleased and slightly winded when shortly after three o'clock the last cock had been forked up onto the rack and the load on the rack had been transferred, via an old fashioned horse-drawn hay fork, to the bulging mow in the Wayne barn.

Managing somehow to look cool and clean and sweet in the stifling heat under the high hipped roof, Amy came into Ferron's arms.

"I love you, Paul."

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"I love you," Ferron said.

Amy's gray-green eyes searched his face. "You're so big. So strong. You will be good to me, Paul?"

Ferron spat out a mouthful of chaff and dust and wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "You know I will."

Amy's eyes continued to search his face. "And gentle?"

Ferron did what he'd wanted to do for a long time. He cupped the tempting bulge of a small buttock. "As gentle as David was with Noi."

Amy sucked in her breath. Then, as if the pressure of his hand had inflamed her beyond all control, she strained against him as they kissed.

"Sweetheart. My husband-to-be," she panted.

Ferron felt as if he was holding a white hot flame in his arms. The small breasts boring into his chest made the blood pound in his ears. Sweat dripped into his eyes and blinded him. It was all he could do to keep from flinging her down in the hay and ripping the gray dress from her quivering young body. He wanted to hear her scream with pain as he took her, brutally, savagely, then hear her moan with ecstasy as her body acclimated itself to this new way of life. He wanted to see her small oval face ugly and contorted with passion when, as the Bible so succinctly put it, they 'knew' each other for the first time.

His hand grew even bolder. Amy strained against it for a moment, then took it from where it was and pressed it to her heart. "Tomorrow night, Paul," she whispered. She stood on her tiptoes and nibbled at his lower lip. "Tomorrow night I'll be all yours. Then you can teach me."

Smiling, she descended the hay mow ladder to the floor of the barn proper and walked, a little unsteadily, in the direction of the house.

Ferron stood where she had left him, his blood still pounding in his ears, sweat still blinding him.

He had been right about Amy. There was a hidden devil

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in her gray-green eyes. She was a smouldering volcano wanting to be awakened, wanting to erupt, wanting to be stoked by a master.

Then you can teach me.

It was going to be a pleasure.

He descended the ladder, then walked down the inside barn stairs to the fieldstone stable that held the long rows of cow stanchions and horse stalls. Wayne was just turning the teams out. He slapped the big bay on its sweaty rump as he smiled at Ferron.

"A good week's work, son," he smiled. "I'll make a farmer of you yet."

God forbid, Ferron thought. Aloud he said, soberly, "It's new, but I'll catch on."

"And fast," Wayne nodded. He took his old fashioned open-faced watch from the bib pocket of his overalls. "Hmm. Jest a little after three. You plannin' on doing anything afore supper, Paul?"

Ferron had considered a swim in the lake. It was spring fed, reputedly bottomless, and couldn't be as warm as it looked. But business came before pleasure, and old man Wayne was his business. "No, not particularly," he said.

Wayne returned his watch to his pocket. "Then I'd appreciate it if you'd ride into town with me, Paul. I got some truck freight down to Hackensacker's store, some new heavy duty tires and a new draw bar for the tractor. Asides, I'd sort of like to talk to you."

"I'd be glad to go with you," Ferron said.

He glanced at the locked trunk of the Plymouth as he climbed into the seat of Wayne's late model pick-up truck. He always felt easier when the Plymouth was at the farm. There were no thieves in New Hope but one could never tell when a stranger might come through.

The old man drove in silence until they were half way to New Hope. Then, passing the Ben Frost place, he cleared

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his throat and began to talk. "Now, about that farm I promised to deed to you an' Amy, Paul."

"Yes?" Ferron said.

The old man seemed embarrassed. "Well, I—I've kind of changed my mind."

You would, Ferron thought.

Wayne continued. "Tain't much of a farm to begin with an' you being new to farming, I bin a studyin' on it and I've come to the conclusion it might be best if I deed the home place to you."

Ferron glanced sideways at him to see if the old man was serious. He seemed to be.

Wayne explained. "That way I'd still have Amy home with me, and could give you a hand if anything came up you couldn't handle."

Ferron closed his eyes briefly. There were 2000 acres in the lake farm, not counting the 500-acre lake. He must, he decided, live right. Instead of having to con him, the old man was giving him the equivalent of a quarter of a million dollars.

Wayne added, "Of course it would be understood I'd always have a home with you and that you'd never sell the farm, or any part of it, that it would go to the children that you and Amy are going to have."

"Of course," Ferron said.

He felt mildly disappointed. He had expected to have to scheme up something clever to get his hands on the old man's money. And here Wayne was handing it to him, like Salome had demanded John The Baptist's head—on a silver platter.

The old man lifted one hand from the wheel in an amiable gesture. "But we kin settle all that next week or next month, for that matter, after you an' Amy are married." He nudged Ferron shyly. "I know how 'tis with young folks. I was

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young once myself. For the first few weeks or so, you won't want to think about anything but each other."

"Yes, sir," Ferron said.

Wayne was practical. "Amy is small but wide hipped and shouldn't have any trouble birthing her first young one, or the ones that will come after."

"No, sir," Ferron said. He'd never been so shocked. It was somehow indecent for her own father to talk about Amy as if she was a young heifer or filly about to come in season.

Wayne saw nothing indecent about it. "She'll be able to nurse 'em, too. She has nice breasts and should have a lot of milk."

Ferron wished the old fool would shut up. If he didn't, in another minute he was going to climb out of the truck and, lake farm or not, do what he'd almost done in the hay mow.

"Built like her mother," Wayne confided.

The two general stores in New Hope were doing a good Saturday afternoon's business. There were at least fifty cars and trucks in town, all of them post-war models.

Wayne drove around the rear of the general store to the corrugated iron shed in which Hackensacker ran a drop point for a trucking firm operating out of New York.

Several younger farmers, Ira Swinton among them, were sitting on the loading platform. Ferron studied the younger man's flushed face as he got down from the truck. Swinton had better watch himself. If he didn't, the first thing he knew he'd find himself 'churched.' The young farmer hadn't gotten his bloodshot eyes from drinking sweet cider.

He climbed the stairs and started into the shed after Wayne but Swinton, determined on trouble, thrust out a hand and stopped him. "Well, if it ain't the purty Bible peddler."

Ferron looked down at the hand on his shirt but said nothing.

"Marryin' Amy t'morrow, ain't you?"

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"At four o'clock."

Swinton released his shirt. "Well, you better be good to her. Thash all I got to say."

Ferron controlled his temper with an effort. "I intend to."

Wayne had walked into the shed in search of his merchandise. He returned to the loading platform. "Now leave off this sort of thing, Ira," he said. "I've put up with about all I intend to put up with you."

"Ha," Swinton jeered. "You've put up. I was as good as engaged to Amy until this Parrish came along."

"Were the banns read from the pulpit?"

"No."

"Then you've no claim on her."

Swinton swayed slightly. "No. But this Johnny-come-lately Bible salesman has. An' wha' do we know about him? For all we know, he thinks more of your money than he does of Amy."

"That's a lie," Ferron lied.

Swinton became even more truculent. "Don't you call me a liar." He slapped Ferron's face with his open palm. "I think you're a phoney. What's more I think you're a coward to boot."

"Now, Ira," old man Wayne cautioned.

He attempted to step between the two younger men and Ferron brushed him aside gently. "Just a minute, please, Mr. Wayne." He looked at the drunken young farmer. "You shouldn't have done that, Ira. I've been patient. I've attempted to reason with you. As I told you last week when I came back to New Hope I've prayed for you every night. But no man calls me a coward." He turned his face sideways. "If you think I am, slap my other cheek."

Swinton debated briefly, then slapped Ferron's face with the back of his hand.

Ferron looked at Wayne.

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The old man shook his head. "It's up to you, Paul. God knows you turned both cheeks."

"Here on the platform or on the ground?" Ferron asked Swinton.

"On the ground," Swinton said.

The group on the platform descended the short flight of stairs and formed a circle with young Swinton and Ferron in the center of it. Ferron was still rolling up his sweat-blackened sleeves when the younger man rushed him. He parried the blow easily, then brought up a left from his knees that rocked Swinton back on his heels. Ferron followed it with a right, then a left, then a hard right to the face, deliberately pulling his blows to keep from knocking him out, twisting his fists as they landed, cutting the young farmer's florid face to bloody ribbons. Perhaps if he worked him over, the young fool would leave him alone.

Swinton was young. He was strong. He fought doggedly, but was no match for Ferron's skill. From the first blow Ferron hit the younger man at will and hit him where he wanted to hit him.

Ferron fought with a smile on his face. He hadn't enjoyed himself so much in two weeks. After all, this was his business. Whit had paid him one hundred and fifty bucks a week to keep the sheep in line. Ferron's smile turned wry. Young Swinton was lucky he wasn't getting the full treatment.

The news of the fight had spread. Someone in the front of the store was yelling, "Fight."

Wayne pressed close to Ferron's back. "Git it over with, Paul," he counseled. "If the preacher catches us at this, he'll give us all hob."

Ferron nodded. "Whatever you say."

He measured Swinton with his left hand, then swung his right fist to the point of the other man's jaw. The young farmer dropped like a poled ox. His fingers clawed at the

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dust for a moment; then he rolled over on his back and lay motionless.

"I'll say 'plenty' for him," one of his companions said.

Wayne hurried Ferron back into the truck. "The tires and the draw bar kin wait. This will have blown over by morning, but we'd best git back to the farm. Ira had what you gave him coming, but if the preacher gits here before we leave he'll still be a prayin' over the both of you when it's time for you an' Amy to walk down the aisle."

Ferron rode looking at his fists. He was sorry the incident had happened. On the other hand, it might keep Swinton away from him.

It didn't seem to bother Wayne. For the moment, at least, he was the tough first sergeant who'd gone to France with the Rainbow Division. Neither man spoke during the short trip back to the farm, but as Wayne braked the truck in the barnyard, he squeezed Ferron's arm. "You're all man, Paul," he said. "And what I said in the field goes double. Amy is lucky to git you for a husband an' I'm pleased to have you for a son."

The old man walked to the barn on some business of his own. Ferron walked into the house in search of Amy. The brief fight had stimulated him. He wanted to kiss her, touch her again, prepare her wedding night. She was one cute little devil.

Then you can teach me . . .

She wasn't in the kitchen or the sitting room. Ferron glanced into the closed parlor, then returned to the kitchen, disappointed. He was hot. The hay chaff irritated his body. He looked out the kitchen window at the lake; then, on impulse, took a towel and a bar of soap from the wash stand on the back stoop and walked down the lane toward the lake.

Things were going too well. It frightened him. He wished he knew what was happening in New York. The last paper he'd read had stated he was wanted for questioning. Ques-

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tioning about what? He wondered what the big eyes had decided was back of his impersonation of an officer from the D.A.'s office. And what had they done about Roberts? Every time he thought of Roberts he could howl. The big sergeant hadn't killed Whit. In time the law would have to turn him loose. Meanwhile it might teach him and Shirley not to be so trusting.

The shore of the lake was rimmed with huge glacial boulders intermingled with century-old trees. Ferron picked his way along a big boulder to the water and felt it with his hand. It looked hot but it was cold. He stripped off his clothes and waded out knee-deep in the water. The almost icy water felt good. He stood looking out over the lake. It was a beautiful body of water. It was small wonder the summer resort syndicate operating in the hills had offered old man Wayne the fantastic sums they had. Well, once he and Amy were married, and the property was in his name, he'd take the best offer in cash—and scram.

"Thou art a good worker, Paul."

Heifer dust. He'd spent all of his adult years avoiding work. And with a hundred grand already in the kitty and twice that much to come, he didn't intend, at the ripe age of 34, to turn himself into a work horse. It was much more fun to be a stallion.

It was still on the shore of the lake. The only sound was the cry of a loon flapping its way across the water. One hand resting on the huge boulder beside which he was standing Ferron walked on out into the lake, feeling for the drop-off, trying to find water deep enough in which to swim.

He came to the end of the boulder and suddenly stopped as a woman gasped.

Ferron turned slowly and looked at the girl standing on the rocks at the shore. Amy had had the same idea he had. She stood, completely nude, drying her slim body with a large towel.

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Ferron had never seen anything more beautiful. The girl was lush without being big. Her breasts were smaller than Lydia's but perfectly formed, as if the material of which they were made was too rare and too precious to waste. Her hips were wide but her haunches were the unripe haunches of a child.

Ferron stood rooted where he was, thinking of the Song Of Solomon. Almost unconsciously he quoted aloud:

" 'How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, Oh prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hand of a cunning workman.

" 'Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. Thy two breasts are like young roes that are twins.' "

As if mesmerized, Amy quoted from the same book:

" 'My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten ten thousand. His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers; his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is of Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.' "

Ferron waded toward her and stood on the shore just below her. Amy made a slight movement toward him, then stopped. "No. It would be wrong," she said.

Ferron held out his arms. There was a heaviness in his throat. "But we're going to be married tomorrow afternoon."

"Tomorrow, then," Amy said breathlessly. "Five minutes—one minute—after we're married. On the way home in the car. Tomorrow it will be all right. I want you as much as you want me. But we don't belong to each other yet. We won't until we are married."

Ferron dropped his arms. "I suppose you're right."

Amy scrambled higher on the rocks. "This way it would be evil. Neither of us would ever forgive ourselves."

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It sounded to Ferron as if Amy did not really want to believe what she was saying. She was almost panting now, and Ferron had to fight himself to keep from climbing up after her.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow was a hell of a long way off—but Ferron would wait. He couldn't risk spoiling anything now, not when everything was just a thread beyond his reach.

Without speaking, he turned to leave.

"Paul!" The voice was soft, plaintive, passionate.

He stopped dead still with his feet in the water. He did not dare turn.

"Paul!"

"No, Amy," he said firmly but gently.

He heard a kind of moan coming from behind him. He turned. She was holding her arms out to him, her mouth wet and open. Then, as she saw that he did not move toward her, she began to scramble down the rocks toward him. But suddenly she stepped on a patch of lichen and slipped off the small boulder onto the sharp rock below it. There was a dull snap as of a broken bone. Amy gave a little cry of pain, then began to sob softly.

Ferron ran to where she was lying. "What happened?"

"I think I've broken my leg," Amy told him. There was no anger in her voice, only a great disappointment. "Now we'll *have* to wait. How long does it take a bone to heal?"

"Six to eight weeks," Ferron said, and swore softly under his breath as he went to get her clothes and his.

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Chapter Ten

THE HEAT WAVE PERSISTED. It had been three weeks now since it had rained. Ferron lay hot-eyed, still sleepless, as dawn brightened the window and birds began to cheep and twitter in the thick-leaved trees in front of the Inn.

He couldn't go on as he was much longer. He had to have a cigarette. He had to have a drink. He had to have a woman. If he didn't have some relief soon he'd find himself in one of the small sheds back of the Inn ogling the scantily clad models in the lingerie section of last year's mail order catalogue.

The sheet on which he was lying was drenched with perspiration. He sat up on the sway-backed bed, then walked to the open window and looked down at the rusted metal roof of the Plymouth. The car grew older and shabbier every day.

He raised his eyes to the street beyond the car. New Hope began its day early. There were already several cars and pick-up trucks in front of the two general stores. As he watched, a clucking hen shepherded a brood of downy chicks across the secondary road and disappeared behind Hackensacker's store.

With New York less than a hundred miles away.

The thought intrigued Ferron. He could drive into town, stay at a cheap hotel, buy a woman and a fifth of whiskey, and drive back the next day. He could tell Amy and her father he was going to sever his connections with the King James Publishing Society. Both Amy and old man Wayne were hell determined he give up his room at the Inn and stay at the farm until her broken leg had knitted. As Amy

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had pointed out, it would be perfectly proper now, now that her right leg was encased in a ten pound plaster cast.

Ferron swore softly at the brightening day. If only he hadn't gone down to the lake.

"It was my fault," she assured him. "I shouldn't have let you see me that way until we were married. Naturally, loving you as I do, I wanted you."

Love.

The thought of driving into New York intrigued Ferron. He turned from the window and studied his reflection in the aged mirror over the dresser. Even without the blue serge suit and stiff high white collar, he looked like a Holy Joe. At least like a rube.

The short haircut not only had enlarged his ears, it had changed the entire contour of his face. It made his peeling cheekbones look higher. It hollowed his cheeks and emphasized his jutting jaw. Two weeks of working in the fields had etched deep lines that ran from the corners of his nostrils down beyond the corners of his mouth. His sunburned face was a patchwork of peeling flesh. The strain had told on him. He looked ten years older than he had.

Ferron continued to study his reflection. If he kept away from up town, if he checked into some small hotel on Second Avenue or near the Battery, the odds were a hundred to one against anyone recognizing him. He looked as much like a professional model as young Ira Swinton did. He wasn't Les Ferron anymore. He was Paul Parrish.

He continued to plan as he dressed. He could go to the offices of the King James Publishing Society and sever, in person, the contact he'd made by mail. And once his business was finished he could check into some small hotel, smoke the room blue, buy a woman and a fifth, raise hell all night long, and be back in New Hope the next day without anyone being the wiser. What was more, he could find

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out the situation on Whit, find out how hot he was and what the big eyes had done about Roberts.

His meager toilet completed, he went downstairs to breakfast. The cottage fried potatoes were greasy, the thin pancakes were sour, and the homemade sausage had begun to turn bad. On his return he'd give up his room at the Inn and move out to the farm. He wouldn't be able to enjoy either Amy or the money if he died of indigestion before he could wind up the affair.

Old man Jepson was concerned. "Ain't eating much this morning, are you, Mr. Parrish? Amy a-breaking her leg the way she done the night afore you were to be married must have put you off your feed."

"It must have," Ferron agreed.

He gassed the Plymouth at the pump in back of Hackensacker's store and drove out to the farm. Old man Wayne was already out in the field but Amy was sitting on the porch with the cast on her broken leg resting on a priceless antique cobbler's bench.

Ferron kissed her good morning and told her what he had in mind. Amy was pleased to learn he intended to move to the farm but was a little jealous of his proposed trip to New York.

"Some day I want to see New York," she said.

Ferron ran his fingers through her hair, and wished he hadn't. His need was a physical pain. "Maybe some day you will," he told her. "Maybe we'll go to New York on our honeymoon."

Amy was pleased. "In five weeks."

Ferron looked at the cast ruefully. Of all the rotten luck. It would happen to him. "Yes. In five weeks," he said, smiling.

Back in his car, he drove slowly down the secondary road leading to the highway beside the river. When he reached the highway he kept well in the right hand lane, allowing

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the fast-moving traffic to pass him. He didn't want to tangle with another state trooper. He wasn't in a mood to go through that again.

His desires increased with the miles. He was tempted several times to pull into roadside taverns and buy a quick one and a package of Camels. He resisted the temptation. Some of the younger men in New Hope drove into New York regularly to deliver the produce they raised. One of them might see him. And Paul Parrish neither drank nor smoked.

Ferron smiled wryly as he thought of the old gag about the reformed tart playing the bass drum in a Salvation Army band; she had allegedly testified:

"I used to be a bad girl. I used to smoke cigarettes. I used to let men give me jewels and money. I used to let them take me to the Stork Club and 21. I used to let strange men love me. I used to have a hell of a good time. And now—now all I do is beat this goddam drum."

Ferron laughed. He knew how she felt. He felt the same way.

The staggered skyline of New York excited him even more. He crossed the George Washington Bridge and turned south on the Express Highway, leaving it in the middle 50s.

New York hadn't changed. It was still the greatest city in the world. The traffic was still as bad. There was just as much noise and color as there had been three weeks ago. There were still as many pretty girls on its crowded walks.

He drove down lower Broadway to the City Hall, then turned east toward the offices of the King James Publishing Society. The executive with whom he talked was about what Ferron had expected from his letters. The man was sorry to learn that he was giving up his territory to devote his full time to farming, assuring Ferron that he'd sold more merchandise in the territory than any other salesman they'd ever had.

Ferron was amused. What he'd done he had done in one or

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two days a week. If he'd really worked at the racket he could have made a chamber pot full of money. In the middle of their conversation he began to sweat. His car was parked at the curb with one hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars in its trunk. And this wasn't New Hope. This was lower east side Manhattan. The punks lounging on the corners would steal dimes out of a blind man's cup.

He concluded his business as rapidly as he could. As far as he could tell the car hadn't been disturbed. He did have a feeling he was being watched. He stood a moment beside the car scanning the faces of the crowd on the walk but could see not one who looked like a detective.

It was his nerves, he decided.

There was a fourth rate hotel down the street. Ferron studied it thoughtfully. From where he stood it looked like the type of hotel he had in mind, a hotel where no questions were asked, where the bellboys were glad to make a fast buck by furnishing anything that a guest might desire.

He drove down the street and found a parking spot a few cars' length from the entrance. There was a liquor store next to the hotel. Ferron's mouth watered at the sight of the bottles displayed. After a good drunk and a night spent wrestling with some tart, it might just be that he could stand New Hope for another five or six weeks.

He set his paper suitcase on the walk and got the carton of money and Bibles out of the trunk. It was impossible for him to carry both. He carried the carton into the lobby of the hotel and motioned to a bellboy.

"I've got a grip out on the walk."

"You're checking in?" the boy asked.

Ferron nodded. "That's right. I want a room with a bath." He dropped his voice. "And, possibly, a few other things."

The bellboy eyed the five dollar bill that Ferron was holding, creased lengthwise, between his fingers. "You name

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it, chum," he said flatly. "It's very possible I have what you want in stock."

Ferron registered for a room then walked back to the street to pick up some cigarettes and a fifth of whiskey before going upstairs. As he stood on the walk in front of the hotel he had the same feeling that he'd had before, that he was being watched.

He started for the door of the liquor store, stopped, struck by a sudden thought, and studied the cars parked along the curb. Six car lengths behind the aged Plymouth a mud splattered Buick looked strangely familiar. Ferron looked at the driver. It was Swinton. Small wonder he'd felt eyes. The young farmer, still suspicious, had trailed him from New Hope.

Ferron felt angry, then cheated. He should have broken young Swinton's neck instead of just slapping him around. A dame and a fifth were out of the question now. He'd had them.

He strode to the newsstand on the corner, bought the afternoon papers, and walked back to the hotel.

The bellboy was eager to make a dollar. He asked, "Now just what was it you had in mind, Mister, a blonde or a brunette? I've got a cute little brunette number stopping right here in the hotel. She comes higher than some, twenty dollars. But she's young and well stacked, see? And I never hear no complaints."

Ferron's stiff collar felt like it was choking him. "I don't know what you're talking about," he told the boy, and waved him out of the room.

He didn't dare take a chance. Young Swinton was dumb but persistent. All the young farmer wanted was a chance to blow the whistle. And all he needed now was to be picked up by the vice squad. Coming to New York had been a mistake.

Ferron sat on the edge of the bed, wanting a cigarette,

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wanting a drink, wanting a woman and afraid to indulge in any of the three so-called vices. With over $100,000 in the paper carton at his feet.

At least he could take a bath. He bathed, enjoying the hot water, then stretched out nude on the bed and read the afternoon papers he'd bought.

The Bennett case had been moved back to the city page. He was still wanted but, seemingly, only for questioning. The police reasoning was simple, if fallacious. They reasoned that Whit had sent him to talk to Roberts, to try to persuade the big sergeant to keep his mouth shut, and Roberts had refused to be talked to. The police reasoned further, acccording to the reporter's rehash of the case, that, afraid he might be involved and arrested as Whit's accomplice in usury, he, Les Ferron, had blown town.

Lydia had testified that he had spent most of Monday night with her but was vague about the time of his arrival. She thought he had come in a few minutes after seven. The parking lot attendant was on record as saying he'd parked his car at seven. Both statements put him on 82nd Street, miles away from the brownstone front on or about the time that Whit had been killed.

Neither he nor the yellow Cadillac had been seen since, although one of the officers detailed to the George Washington Bridge *thought* he had crossed the bridge during the early hours of Tuesday morning.

The police wanted to question him, badly. But, seemingly, they didn't suspect him of killing Whit. Why should they? They had a suspect tailored to order.

Roberts had quarreled with Whit on Saturday afternoon. He'd threatened to beat his brains in. A dozen clients waiting to make loans or pay interest on their loans had heard him. Monday morning Roberts had mailed a letter to the District Attorney's office stating, in so many words, that if they didn't do something he was going to take the matter into

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his own hands. Monday night Whit had been killed and the only alibi the big sergeant could offer was, "Sure. I threatened to kill him, but I didn't. I was passed out drunk in my sister-in-law's flat."

Ferron read on, amused. Roberts was in a bad way. The grand jury had voted a true bill against him and he had been indicted and would have to stand trial.

He still wanted a woman, a drink, and a cigarette, but Ferron felt more secure than he had in three weeks. He doubted if a jury would find Roberts guilty but, for the time being at least, the heat was off him.

It was as hot in the hotel room as it had been in his room in New Hope, possibly a few degrees hotter. Ferron paced the floor restlessly for a few minutes, then dressed and called downstairs for a boy to help him with the carton and his bag. The good time he'd planned was over. He'd had it. The only thing he could do was go back to New Hope and tough it out.

Swinton was in the lobby, sitting in one of the big leather chairs, watching the elevator doors in a wall mirror as Ferron stepped from the elevator with the bellboy behind him struggling with the heavy paper carton.

Ferron drove slowly back uptown and, on impulse, drove by the apartment hotel in which Lydia lived. The shades of her apartment were drawn. At three o'clock in the afternoon. Ferron knew a moment of jealousy. He wondered who her new boy friend was, for whom she was earning another thousand dollar watch.

"I'd sleep with the devil for you."

Hah.

His need of the red-haired girl, any girl, was sour in his mouth as he worked his way back to the Express Highway.

Twice the car almost stalled in traffic. As he crossed Tenth Avenue it boiled and he had to refill the radiator. He would do something about the Plymouth soon. He would have to

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trade it in on a later model or buy a new cheap car. He could tell Amy and her father that it was his wedding present to Amy, that he had bought it out of the money he'd saved. Neither of them would question the statement. Both of them believed every word he told them.

From time to time, as he drove, Ferron glanced in his rear vision mirror. Swinton was with him all the way. Swinton had followed him to Lydia's and then north along the bank of the river. The bastard, Ferron thought. Swinton came into New York almost once a week with produce, and every time he made the trip he probably enjoyed all the things Ferron had hoped to enjoy just this once.

The thought infuriated Ferron. So did the car. It continued to give him trouble. He had to stop for water three times, twice to allow the overheated motor to cool, and once to change a flat. What should have been a two-hour trip went on endlessly. Somewhere along the line, Swinton had dropped the trail. He had probably headed right back to New York, Ferron thought ruefully. It was after nine o'clock when he got back to New Hope. It was Saturday night and the small town was crowded with farmers who had come in to do their weekly shopping. There were even a few cars in front of the Inn.

Ferron made certain the trunk of the Plymouth was locked and carried his paper suitcase inside. Old man Jepson was back of the desk.

"Quick trip, eh?" he asked.

Ferron nodded. "Yes. I just drove in to give up my territory and pick up what commission I had coming."

Jepson was in an expansive mood. "Pshaw. Don't blame you, Paul. No sense you a stayin' out on the road amidst all them unbelievers when Homer needs a hand bad as he does. Saw him over to the store this afternoon and he said he was a goin' to start cutting his rye next week—that is, if it doesn't rain." The old man looked out the mullioned win-

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dow back of the desk. "Rain's due most any day now. Might even come t'night. It lightninged and thundered right smart 'bout half an hour ago."

Ferron wasn't interested. He picked up his grip again and climbed the stairs to his second floor room. It hadn't changed. The light was still unshaded. The bed was still swaybacked. The room still smelled sour. He unlaced his shoes, then took off his coat and shirt and undershirt and sat on the bed as a flash of lightning streaked across the sky.

It could be old man Jepson was right about it raining. He hoped so. He hoped it hailed and beat Homer Wayne's rye so flat that it couldn't be harvested. If running a binder and pitching bundles of rye was as hard work as haying had been, the coming week would be hot hell.

Ferron looked at the palms of his hands. The blisters had healed but his palms were still tender to the touch, as soft and tender as the inside of a woman's thighs.

Ferron wished he hadn't thought of the simile. He fluffed his pillow and lay back then sat up again as the fragrance of cigarette smoke and perfume wafted faintly through the otherwise sour smell of the room.

Ferron looked at the door between his room and the next room. He never bothered to lock it. Now the door was standing ajar. The fragrance of tobacco and perfume grew even stronger. Now the door was standing ajar, and whoever was in the adjoining room was feminine. At least they used perfume.

The small veins in Ferron's temples began to throb. He padded silently toward the door in his stocking feet and stopped as it opened into the room. Lydia stood in the open doorway, swaying slightly as she looked at him.

"Surprise," she said.

Her feet were bare. She was wearing a sheer white negligee. Her eyes were both sullen and slitted. A cigarette dangled

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from her red lips. Her full breasted body exuded a strong aroma of perfume and good bourbon.

Ferron didn't know what to do with his hands. He hooked his thumbs in his belt. The small veins in his temples continued to beat rhythmically, in time with the pound of his heart.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

Lydia had been leaning against the jamb of the door. Now she stood erect, and the movement tightened the sheer nylon that covered her breasts. Her eyes grew even more sullen.

"Never min' that," she said thickly. "That can wait. What I want to know is, where is she?"

"Where is who?" Ferron asked her.

"This other girl," Lydia said. "The girl you *think* you're going to marry."

Chapter Eleven

FINGERS OF LIGHTNING felt their way across the sky. For a moment, despite the drawn shade, the dimly lighted room was brilliantly illumined. The lightning was followed by a low rumble of thunder that seemed to shake the old Inn.

Ferron realized his chest was laboring with the simple effort of breathing. He stood with his legs spread slightly, looking at Lydia, wondering how she had found him.

Lydia forgot her anger momentarily and was alcoholically sorry for herself. "Well, aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am," Ferron lied.

"You don't act like it."

Ferron forced himself to take her in his arms. "How's this? Better?"

Lydia raised her smeared lips. "You still haven't kissed me."

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Ferron kissed her. She still tasted good.

Lydia mouthed his lips wetly, straining her body against his. "I've been so worried about you, Les. I like to have died when I woke up that Tuesday morning an' you were gone."

Why didn't you? Ferron thought. He tried to remember if he'd locked his door. "I can imagine," he said.

Self pity filled Lydia's voice. "An' then the cops came an' slapped me around because I said I didn't know where you were."

"You didn't."

"They took me over to 52nd Street and held me for a week. An' they wouldn't even let me have any cigarettes."

Ferron felt coldly detached. "That's to bad. I can imagine how you must have suffered."

He released her and tried his door. It was locked. He unlocked it and looked down the hall. There was no one in the dimly lighted hall and no light in the foyer. There was a light in old man Jepson's room at the far end of the hall.

He relocked the door and walked back to Lydia. She was still standing in the doorway.

"Did you kill Whit, Les?" she asked him.

"Of course not," Ferron said. "Don't you read the papers? That big sergeant killed him."

"Then why did you run away?"

"That's a long story."

Lydia's smeared lips twisted. "I can imagine."

Ferron made certain the shade in the adjoining room was drawn. "Let's go into your room."

The red-haired girl weaved uncertainly across the faded rug and sat on the rumpled bed in her room, looking around with distaste. "This is a hell of a dump."

"It's all of that," Ferron agreed.

He looked at the bedside table. A cigarette, burned to an ash, was smouldering in a tray that Lydia had improvised

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from the top of a cold cream jar. There was a full package of cigarettes beside the tray. There was also a half-filled fifth of bonded bourbon.

Lydia looked at the bottle and brightened. "Let's have a drink."

Ferron handed her the bottle. "You have one."

He watched her tilt the bottle to her lips. He'd never wanted a drink so badly but he didn't dare take one. Perhaps later, but not now. He *had* to know how Lydia had found him.

Lydia wiped at a trickle of spilled whiskey that was zigzagging down the cleft between her breasts. "Whash a matter with you? You sign the pledge or somethin'?"

"Something like that," Ferron said. He studied Lydia's eyes, wishing he knew how drunk she was.

Lydia leaned back on both hands and giggled. "Thas what Mrs. Harvey tol' me. She said you were one of the nicest young men she had ever known."

Ferron pulled a chair up to the bed and sat with his knees touching Lydia's. "You mean Mrs. Harvey in Palisades Falls?"

"Is there another Mrs. Harvey?"

"No."

"Then that's the one I mean."

"How did you meet her?"

Lydia fluffed the pillow against the headboard of the bed and made herself more comfortable. "How do you think? I went there."

"How did you know her address?"

Lydia giggled. "I found it."

"Where?"

"You remember that Sunday night you came back after being away for three days?"

"Yes."

"Well, after you went to sleep I looked through your

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pockets, and what do you think I found in your wallet? A room receipt signed by a Mrs. Harvey of 210 Oak Street, Palisades Falls, New York."

The beads of perspiration dripping from Ferron's forehead were blurring his vision. He used the skirt of Lydia's negligee to wipe his face, and wished he hadn't. The garment wasn't fastened at the waist and as he wiped at his face it fell away, exposing the familiar white body.

"So that's why you kept asking me if there was some other woman."

Lydia made herself modest. "What would you have thought if you'd found a receipted hotel bill in my purse?"

"What did you tell Mrs. Harvey?"

"I told her I was your sister."

"Did she believe you?"

"She seemed to."

"And what did she tell you?"

Lydia sat up and refluffed the pillow before lying back again. "She said you were marrying a girl named Amy Wayne, a pretty girl whose father owned a farm that was worth a lot of money." She uncapped the whiskey bottle and looked at Ferron as she drank. "The hell you are. I've told you how I felt. I told you I'd do anything for you. But you're not marrying anyone." The corners of her pretty mouth turned down. "Is that clear?"

Ferron took the bottle from her and recapped it. "Very clear." He set the bottle back on the bed table. If Lydia passed out, he was sunk. There would be no way he could get rid of her.

"It better be," Lydia said. "You try to marry anyone but me an' I'll raise more hell than you ever saw." She studied Ferron's face and shook her head as if puzzled. "What you done to yourself? You look like a goddam farmer."

"Shh. Not so loud," Ferron said.

He got up from the chair, unlocked the door of her room

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and looked down the hall again. The light in old man Jepson's room had been turned out. He thought he could hear the old man snoring. He closed and relocked the door.

As he sat back in the chair Lydia asked, "If you didn't kill Whit what are you so jumpy about?"

"All right. So I killed Whit. Why the hell do you think I'm lying low in a joint like this?"

The information seemed to sober Lydia. "You killed Whit?"

"Shh."

"But they've indicted that guy Roberts. Even the cops who questioned me don't think you killed him. All they want to do is talk to you."

Ferron took a cigarette from the package on the bed table and lighted it. It had been three weeks since he had smoked. The harsh smoke rasped his throat. He coughed.

Lydia's eyes continued to search his face. "You mean what you just said, Les?"

"About what?"

"You killed Whit?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Ferron brushed the question aside. "That doesn't matter now. What does matter is getting clear. I had everything all set and now you've fouled it up. Were you followed to the Falls?"

"Of course not," Lydia said scornfully. "Do I look like a fool? I took an excursion boat to Bear Mountain, then took a bus the rest of the way."

"How did you get from the Falls here?"

Lydia giggled. "I hitchhiked."

"With whom?"

"Some farmer."

"Young or old?"

"Young. In a muddy Buick."

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Ferron looked around the room. The only luggage he could see was a cheap canvas bag large enough to hold some cosmetics, a change of lingerie, and the fifth of whiskey.

Lydia's eyes followed his. "I traveled light," she told him. "If any cops were watching me I wanted them to think I was going on an excursion, see. Besides, I didn't think I'd need any clothes. I don't usually need any when I'm with you."

Ferron looked at her, then away. His need for a woman had been a physical necessity. Now, he doubted if he could take Lydia if he tried. "What did you tell this farmer who picked you up?" he asked her. "How did you explain being on the road?"

Lydia giggled again. "I told him the same thing I told the old goat who runs this antique flop house. I told them my boy friend wanted me to be bad, but I wouldn't, that I'd rather walk back to New York."

"What did they say?"

Lydia ran her hands over her breasts, then down over her concave stomach and white thighs. "They said I was a good girl." She blew up at a wisp of hair that had fallen into her eyes. "Although I thought the old goat downstairs was going to hold a prayer meeting right in the lobby before he rented me a room."

"You told him you knew me?"

"Don't be silly." Lydia lighted a fresh cigarette from the stub of the one she was smoking. "I wanted to talk to you first, find out just where I stood."

"I see," Ferron said.

He considered the information. Things weren't as bad as they could be. He doubted if Jepson had connected him with Lydia. The old man would have made some comment if he had. What was more, he wouldn't have assigned her to the adjoining room.

Lydia asked, "So where do we stand?"

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"You know where we stand," Ferron lied. "I'm crazy about you, honey."

"So crazy you ran out on me."

"I told you I killed Whit."

"That hasn't anything to do with you marrying this Amy."

Ferron was partially truthful. "She's just part of the cover, baby. I had to disappear."

"You could have disappeared with me."

The big blond turned on his charm. "I intended to, baby. Believe me. As soon as I cleaned up this little business here I intended to contact you and take you to South America with me."

Lydia studied the glowing tip of her cigarette. "I wish I could believe you."

"You can."

Lydia winced as another streak of lightning brightened the room. "I don't like this place, Les," she said. "Let's get out of here."

"Now? Tonight?"

"Now. Tonight."

"And kick away a quarter of a million dollars?"

"A quarter of a million dollars won't do you any good if you go to the chair."

Ferron sniffed the cigarette he was smoking. "But I'm not going to the chair. A grand jury has indicted Roberts."

Lydia was alcoholically sympathetic. "I feel sorry for him. I saw him at the precinct station after the big eyes had been beating on him for a week, tryin' to make him confess." She shook her head. "He didn't look so good."

"To hell with him," Ferron said.

"The hell with him," Lydia agreed. She snuggled down in the bed. "You *do* love me, don't you, Les?"

"Of course I do."

"This Amy is just another one of your fast deals."

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"Just another one of my fast deals."

"Then prove you love me."

"How?"

The red-haired girl held out her arms. "You know how I mean."

Ferron made certain he'd relocked the door, then proved he loved her. Despite his former desire the act was obnoxious to him. There was nothing between them but flesh. He'd never known it could mean so little.

When it was over, Ferron handed her the whiskey bottle, wondering how he was going to get her out of the room, out of the hotel, and back to New York. He sat up on the edge of the bed and looked down at her flushed face as she drank.

"Now do you believe I love you?"

Lydia studied him over the neck of the bottle. "I don't know if I do or not. That didn't mean a thing. All I was was a woman. What's the matter, doesn't this Amy put out?"

The smoke from a cigarette smouldering in the cap of the cold cream jar got in Ferron's eyes. He snuffed the cigarette. "How do you know her name is Amy?"

"Mrs. Harvey told me."

Ferron used the hem of the sheet to wipe the perspiration from his face. "Oh."

Lydia continued. "What's more, Mrs. Harvey said she came over here to church one Sunday, just to sort of snoop around, and that this Amy is one of the prettiest girls she ever saw." Lydia's face turned ugly. "But you're not going to marry her, understand. I'm not going to take a chance of you crawling in bed with any pretty girl. I know you. You might not ever crawl out again."

Ferron continued to mop at his face. "Don't be silly, baby. All I'm interested in is her father's money."

"Ha."

"I swear it's the truth."

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Lydia was practical. She adjusted the pillow so she could lean against it. "Look, Les. Let's face it. You've lied so goddam much you couldn't tell the truth if you tried."

Ferron tried to think of something to say. There didn't seem to be anything he could say. He unscrewed the cap from the whiskey bottle and let a four ounce drink trickle down his throat. Whiskey still tasted good. He could feel an almost delicate glow spread through his body and remembered he hadn't eaten since he'd had breakfast that morning. He'd meant to eat in some good place in New York, but Swinton had frightened him away.

Lydia made herself comfortable. "How much money was in Whit's safe?"

"Quite a bit," Ferron admitted. "Why?"

"Because we're going away together. You and I. Tonight. I don't care where we go, but we're going away together." Her sharp fingernails bit into Ferron's forearm. "Can't you understand, Les? Neither of us are any good, but we are good for each other. So you killed Whit. So what? Whit was a louse. He got what he had coming. But that hasn't anything to do with us. I love you. You're my man."

Ferron drank from the bottle again, then sat listening to the patter of the rain that had followed the brief electrical display. The whiskey glow continued to spread. He felt more like himself than he had in three weeks, since the night he had killed Whit. Lydia was a nice kid. She meant what she said. She loved him. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for him. He had $127,000 in cash. It would take them a long way.

Lydia continued. "You aren't even hot, Les. I know. I heard the big eyes talking while they were holding me. They think Roberts killed Whit and is clamming up about the money. And because Whit was a former detective they want to keep the whole thing as quiet as they can and get it over with as fast as they can. They'd just as soon not find you.

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You know too much about the kind of business Whit was running"

"So where does that leave us?" Ferron asked.

The patter of the long delayed rain increased to a heavy downpour that made it difficult for Ferron to hear the girl's slurred words.

She smiled. "I told you, sweetheart. We're going away together. Now. Tonight."

"In this rain?"

Lydia's smile turned wry. "We aren't that sweet, either of us. We aren't sugar. We won't melt."

"And if I won't go away with you?"

"I'll blow the whistle. I'll yell my lungs out. I'll say I lied about the time you came to the apartment. I'll tell the cops you told me you killed Whit."

"I'll go to the chair if you do."

"At least no one else will have you."

Ferron drank from the bottle again, then got up from the bed and paced the room slowly. He'd been a fool to feel secure. He was as bad off now as he had been when Whit had been holding the dead Roberts over his head. Lydia meant what she said. She *loved* him. And if she couldn't have him she would play bitch in the manger rather than see him in Amy's arms

With the whiskey roaring in his head, he closed his eyes and thought of Amy as he had seen her standing in the blue lake water. Even the memory excited him. He wanted her. He'd never wanted any woman so badly. Still, after all, she was only a woman. He meant to leave her as soon as he got his hands on her father's money. If he could stall Lydia for six weeks or two months it might be possible for him to have his cake and still have Lydia to munch on.

He sat back on the bed and stroked her. "You know I love you honey."

Lydia's body quivered under his deft caresses. "Words."

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"I mean it," Ferron lied. "Now I'll tell you what I'll do."

"What?"

"You go back to New York in the morning and sit tight for a month or so."

"Then?"

"As soon as I get the score I'm shooting for, I'll contact you and tell you where to meet me."

Lydia brushed his hand aside. "Don't do that. I can't think when you're touching me." She studied his face. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"I give you my word."

"Hah."

Ferron resumed his deft caresses. His voice was low, persuasive. "Or we can set the meeting place right now. Say one of the hotels in Miami Beach. You check in as Mrs. Paul Parrish. And as soon as I con the old man—"

"And make love to Amy."

"That may not be necessary."

"It will if you marry her."

Ferron shrugged. "Even so."

Lydia's eyes turned hard. "No."

"No what?"

"I can't trust you, Les." Lydia raised her voice. "You might like her better'n me. We're leaving here tonight."

Ferron's over-taut nerves gave way. He stopped stroking the girl and slapped her. "For God's sake, not so loud."

Blood trickled out one of the corners of Lydia's mouth. Her peaked breasts rose and fell with her anger. "You hit me again, Les Ferron," she panted, "and I *will* blow the whistle." Her disillusioned eyes searched his face, as if seeing him as he was for the first time. "I think I will anyway. You're just no good. You're rotten all the way through."

Ferron slapped her again. "Shut up."

Lydia didn't even hear him. "You're a heel, the perfect

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heel. Nothing, no one, matters to you. No one but Les Ferron."

Her voice continued to rise. Desperate, Ferron clamped his palm over her mouth. "I told you to shut up. You want to wake up everyone in the Inn?"

The angry girl bit his palm. Ignoring the pain, Ferron wrestled her back on the bed, pressed his left forearm to her throat and leaned his weight on it.

"For God's sake. Please. Use your head."

Lydia tried to wriggle out from under the weight that was choking her. She was strong, but Ferron was stronger. More, he weighed twice as much as she did. As her nude body arched in pain, he weighted it with his bulk and leaned even heavier on the arm pressing against her throat.

"I'll do whatever you say," he lied. Sweat blinded him but he didn't dare release her long enough to wipe it out of his eyes. "We'll go away together. Now. Tonight. But I still think you're being foolish, honey. Listen to reason. I'm shooting for the perfect score, enough to last us as long as we live."

The red-haired girl struggled a few moments longer, then lay still. Ferron continued to lie.

"Here's what I wish you'd do. You go back to New York in the morning. I'll wind up my business here as fast as I can. And I won't touch Amy. I swear it. All I'll shoot for is the money." Sweat dripped from his face to the mop of red hair covering hers. Ferron talked on, determined to convince her. "As soon as I turn the trick I'll shoot you a wire in care of the Acme Studios. As soon as you get it you pack a bag and take off for the Roney Plaza in Miami Beach. I'll fly down the next morning. And from there we'll fly to Havana, or maybe directly to S.A." He eased the pressure on her throat and took his palm off her mouth. "Now can I trust you not to scream?"

Lydia didn't answer.

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Ferron lifted the mop of red hair from the girl's face. Her eyes were open and bulging. Her flushed face was strangely mottled.

Ferron panted, "I asked you a question, baby. Answer me."

Lydia continued to lie motionless. Her slim neck had an oddly distorted look. Instead of being round, it was flat. Her slight body was utterly relaxed.

Ferron wiped the sweat from his eyes, then slapped her lightly. "Stop sulking and answer me, baby."

The pelt of the rain answered him.

Ferron shook a rounded white shoulder. *"Baby."*

Lydia's sightless eyes continued to stare at the high ceiling. Ferron wanted to close them and couldn't bring himself to touch her. He could trust Lydia not to scream. He could trust her not to blow the whistle. She was finished with such things, finished with love and loving. The weight of the body she'd loved had crushed her throat.

Ferron reached for the whiskey bottle with his hands that shook so badly he could scarcely unscrew the cap. It didn't seem possible that Lydia was dead. She couldn't be dead.

"Baby," he whispered.

Outside the window the rain continued to fall. It was the only sound.

Chapter Twelve

FERRON SAT MOTIONLESS on the edge of the bed for a long time, listening to the fall of the rain, looking down at the girl he had killed. He hadn't meant to kill her—but she was dead.

As dead as the bottle in his hand. He screwed the cap

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back on the whiskey bottle and set the bottle on the bed table.

Her slim limbs relaxed in death, she looked somehow indecent. Ferron covered her with the sheet and walked back to his own room. This fixed it. He'd done it now.

In a mounting panic he started to pack his bag. The only thing he could do was get out of New Hope, put as much distance as he could between New Hope and himself by morning. He packed feverishly for a few minutes, then realized that running was futile. He couldn't get far enough in the aged Plymouth to make it worth his while.

He stood holding on to the edge of the dresser, wishing it hadn't happened, wishing he hadn't drunk a pint of whiskey on an empty stomach.

In the morning, old man Jepson would discover the body. There was no law enforcement officer in New Hope but the State Police would be called in immediately.

The first officer to arrive would recognize it as murder and would so inform his commanding officer. Still more officers would arrive, with cameras and test tubes and a portable laboratory. They would establish the means and time of death. They would establish Lydia's identity. They would establish that shortly prior to her death she'd had relations with a man. He was the man in the next room. When it was discovered he was gone, a five state alarm would be broadcast for Paul Parrish. His description and that of his car would go out over the air in a matter of minutes. The first trooper who spotted the car would stop him. And what could he tell the trooper?

That he wasn't really Paul Parrish? That he was actually Les Ferron wanted by the New York police for questioning in the Whit Bennett murder? Even if he clammed up, despite his oatmeal bowl haircut and his Holy Joe suit and collar, some smart big eyes would make him.

The money he'd gotten from Whit's safe would be found

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in the back of his car and whether the New York police wanted to or not they would be forced to crack the case wide open.

They'd want to know where he'd gotten the money. They'd want to know why he'd assumed a new identity. They'd want to know why Lydia had come to see him. They'd want to know why he had killed her.

Some of Ferron's panic left him. He felt cheated. It wasn't fair such a thing should happen to him. He felt a wave of anger toward the dead girl. It was all Lydia's fault. If she'd stayed in New York where she belonged this wouldn't have happened.

He walked back to the doorway between the two rooms. The sheet was tucked snugly around her body and she appeared to be sleeping until you looked at her face.

Ferron cursed her under his breath.

He took a cigarette from the package on the bed table and lighted it. As he sucked smoke into his lungs, still more of his panic receded. He was a smart operator. He should be able to think of something. There must be some way he could still come clean.

He sat in the chair by the bed, looking at the red-haired girl, and forced himself to think. No one, with the exception of Mrs. Harvey, knew that Lydia had come to see him. She'd sworn that she hadn't been followed from New York, that she'd taken a crowded excursion boat to Bear Mountain and a bus the rest of the way to the Falls. Pretty red-haired call girls were a dime a dozen in New York. No one in New York would miss her. Mrs. Harvey wouldn't expect to see her again. If she was gone in the morning, no one but old man Jepson would even wonder where she was. The chances were the old man had made her pay for her room in advance. In that case he would assume she had continued her journey on foot.

The old man would shake his head and ask, "What in the

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name of time is the world a comin' to? A purty little girl like that a galavantin' around in the rain?"

Ferron's whiskey inflamed mind raced on. If only he could get rid of the body. But where? Hiding a mutilated director's case and a girl's body were two different things.

He couldn't hide it in the woods. Some animal would smell it out or some hunter stumble over the shallow grave that he could dig. He had no way to burn it or destroy it.

Then he thought of the lake. The middle of the lake was reputed to be bottomless. The water was cold, spring fed. It would preserve and hold a body indefinitely. Old man Wayne had a flat bottom skiff out of which he fished for whatever kind of fish lived in the lake.

Ferron wet his dry lips with his tongue. If he could row Lydia out to the center of the lake and weight her body properly she would disappear as completely and effectively as Les Ferron had. If the New York police thought anything they would think she had slipped away to join him. Her disappearance would be an additional safeguard.

The more he thought of the idea, the better Ferron liked it. The police would no longer be looking for him alone. They would be looking for a big blond man and a pretty red-haired girl traveling in a yellow Cadillac convertible.

He lighted another cigarette from the stub of the one he was smoking. At least it would be better to try to dispose of Lydia's body than to sit like a terrified square and let the chain of circumstance goose him into the electric chair.

He looked around the room. Lydia's panties and bra and hose were lying on the other chair. Her shoes were on the floor. Her dress hung over the back of the chair.

He stood up and, pulling back the sheet, worked the sheer white nylon negligee out from under the limp body.

"I'm sorry, baby," he told her, "but this is the way it has to be."

He picked her lingerie from the chair and brought it

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back to the bed. The stockings and the bra gave him the most trouble. Even in death her full breasts wouldn't stay cupped and when they did he couldn't fasten the hook and eye on her bra There was, Ferron thought grimly, a hell of a lot of difference between undressing a live and amorous woman and attempting to dress a dead one. His body was drenched with sweat by the time he worked her dress over her head and fitted her shoes to her feet.

The rain continued to fall. Occasional lightning flashes brightened the room. The thunder that followed the lightning still shook the Inn.

He decided that he had been foolish to panic as he had. His luck was holding. The road to the lake would be deserted. There would be no fishermen on the lake. No one in his right mind, except a man with a corpse to hide, would be out in such a rain.

When he finished dressing Lydia, he stood panting a moment, fighting down a wave of nausea. He wished it hadn't happened. He wished he didn't have to do what he had to do. He'd had a lot of good times with Lydia.

He folded the white negligee and put it with the empty whiskey bottle and the package of cigarettes into the beach bag then looked around for anything that he might have forgotten. He'd forgotten both her purse and her garter belt. He put them in the beach bag and zipped it shut.

Satisfied that he hadn't overlooked anything, he returned to his own room and dressed. His fingers felt oddly numb, almost as if they were cold, with sweat staining his shirt and coat as soon as he had put them on.

He unlocked and opened his door and looked out into the dimly lighted hall. Old man Jepson was still snoring. The drumming of the rain on the roof was even louder in the hall than it was in his room. It would cover any noise that he might make carrying Lydia down the stairs.

Leaving his hall door ajar, Ferron closed and locked the

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door connecting the two rooms. Then, using Lydia's key, he unlocked her door from the hall.

She looked pathetically small and fragile. Working rapidly now, Ferron lifted her from the bed, turned out the light, and carried Lydia and the beach bag out into the hall and down the dark stairs leading to the lobby.

It was breathlessly still in the lobby, and hot. Here he couldn't hear the rain. Here the only sound was his own hoarse breathing. Ferron wiped the dead girl's key tag on the skirt of his coat and laid the key on the counter for old Jepson to find in the morning.

The front door gave him trouble. It was both locked and bolted. He fought it open with his free hand then closed it carefully behind him.

The rain continued to fall in a cool silver torrent. It felt good on his flushed face. Both he and the girl he was carrying were soaked by the time he'd walked the few feet to his car.

He put her on the back seat with the small beach bag beside her, then slipped behind the wheel. He sat a long moment looking at the dark Inn. No one had heard him leave. Except for a faint yellow light in the window opening into the hall, none of the windows were lighted.

Here, inside the car with the rain drumming on the tin roof, he couldn't even hear his own breathing. He turned on the ignition, ground on the starter and the aged Plymouth refused to start. Ferron knew a moment of panic. The car *had* to start. Then he remembered the loose battery connection.

He got out and lifted the hood and replaced the terminals. He tried the starter again and exhaled slowly in relief as the car started.

He backed out into the road, turned the car around and drove slowly through the rain-drenched night toward the lake. The rain was falling too hard and too fast for the

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windshield wipers to clear it away. Half of the time the road was a misty blur. The beams of his headlights were blocked by a solid silver wall. Ferron rolled down the window next to the wheel. The rain, slanted at an angle, beat against his wet face and body but at least he could see the slightly lighter colored shoulder of the road.

The Wayne farm, when he reached it, was shrouded in rain and darkness. Both Amy and her father had been asleep for hours.

The lane leading in from the country road was rim deep in water. Ferron switched off his lights and drove down the lane slowly. It occurred to him that it was a good thing Amy had fallen and broken her leg. If Lydia had arrived in New Hope to find him married to Amy there would have been hell to pay. There would have been no way to close Lydia's mouth. The red-haired girl would have yelled so loud and so long that any big eye standing in Times Square would have been able to hear her.

A hundred feet from the house, Ferron braked the car and debated carrying Lydia the rest of the way to the lake. The rain and the need of something to weight her body dissuaded him. Both Amy and her father were sleeping. The drum of the rain would drown the sound of the motor. Visibility was limited to a few feet. He drove on to the barnyard gate and closed it carefully behind him.

Their sleek rumps turned to the rain, a dozen milch cows eyed him incuriously. Ferron slapped them aside and walked into the barn and got a long length of baling wire. Then he remembered a discarded grindstone he'd seen half buried in the trash pile back of the pig sty.

He felt for the stone through the night and the rain and found it. It had lain where it was for years. It was all he could do to lift it. He put it in the trunk of his car, panting heavily, and drove down the flooded lane that was the only access to the lake.

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The skiff was where he remembered seeing it, in a small tree-sheltered cove a hundred feet from where he and Amy had bathed. The oars were leaning against the small sapling to which it was tied. Ferron put them and Lydia in the skiff. The worn out grindstone gave him more trouble. He had to wade waist deep in the water to lay it on the back thwart of the boat. When he did manage to lower it into the boat, its weight lowered the free board to a dangerous few inches above the rain-dimpled water.

Ferron doubted the skiff would hold him. With his added weight it would sink. He stood waist deep in the water fighting panic then realized he still wasn't thinking clearly. Of course. The skiff was almost water-logged with six inches of fresh rain and accumulated water. He bailed first with his hands, then a can, until the skiff was buoyant again.

Once the skiff had been bailed, it held him easily, with four inches of free board to spare. He untied it from the sapling and, guided by an occasional flash of lightning, rowed clumsily but doggedly out to the center and deepest part of the lake.

He had never been so tired. He shipped his oars and sat panting, justifying Les Ferron to Paul Parrish. He hadn't meant this to happen. If Lydia had stayed in New York where she belonged it wouldn't have happened. This was Lydia's fault, not his.

He stood up and made his way uncertainly toward the stern of the skiff. The dead girl's flesh was wet and clammy to the touch. Ferron's hands were slippery with mixed sweat and rain as he threaded a triple length of wire through the center hole of the stone then wrapped it around the dead girl's wrists and ankles. The water was icy cold but even so the body would have a tendency to rise. He had to be certain it was secured to the stone.

Twice he had to sit on the center thwart to rest. The rain slackened slightly and the wind began to blow. In the

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occasional flashes of lightning he could see white caps beginning to dot the water. A wave slopped into the boat and Ferron bailed desperately as he tardily thought of the fact that, at best, his swimming was amateurish and he was at least a quarter of a mile from shore.

The wind rose even higher. The water continued to gain. It was ankle deep in the boat now. Unable to brace his legs properly the stone resisted Ferron's effort to push it and the girl over the side. Both the stone and the girl moved slowly, a quarter inch at a time, then slid over the side of the boat and disappeared with a satisfying gurgle.

Relieved of the weight, the boat rocked wildly and shipped still more water. Ferron bailed desperately, then rowed slowly back to the small cove where he had gotten the boat.

And that took care of Lydia.

He retied the boat to the sapling, put the oars back where he had found them, then sat shivering in his car for a long time, wishing it had a heater, wishing he had a drink, wishing he had a cigarette.

Wishing for a cigarette made him think of the beach bag. His neck stiff, turning as if on a swivel, he turned his head and looked in the back seat of the car. He had forgotten one thing. Lydia's canvas beach bag was still on the back seat. He had the whole thing to do over again.

Dawn wasn't far away when he retied the skiff a second time and drove wearily back up the lane. It was still dark and raining hard but there was a dim light in old man Wayne's bedroom. He'd gotten in just under the wire. In a few more minutes the old man would be going about his morning chores. He would milk the cows and feed the horses and slop the pigs. He would clean out the horse and cow stables. Then, after eating a hearty breakfast, the weather permitting, he would do a full day's work in the fields. If it continued to rain there were a thousand and one

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things the old man could find to do about the barn and granary and pig sty. And from today on. half of the work would be Ferron's. Today he was moving to the farm.

Ferron shuddered at the thought as he drove past the house and out onto the country road. He wished now he hadn't been so greedy. He wished he had listened to Lydia. If they had gone away together, as she had wanted to, they could be nearing the Newark airport. By noon, late afternoon at the latest, they could be in Miami, lolling in the sun, with nothing to do but get drunk and spend Whit's money and make love.

He was wet. He was tired. He was frightened. Ferron tried to laugh off his fear but there was no mirth in his laughter. It might be weeks or months before Amy's broken leg would knit. He still had a long, hard, rocky row to hoe. It could just be that for once in his life Les Ferron had outsmarted Les Ferron. And what applied to Les Ferron also applied to Paul Parrish.

Both his laughter and his fear grew as he drove back through the rain and the wind to the Inn.

'They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.'

It was in the Book.

Chapter Thirteen

IT WAS A FEW MINUTES BEFORE NOON when Ferron was awakened by voices in the adjoining room, the room that Lydia had occupied. Old man Jepson's voice was shrill and querulous.

"Just can't understand it," he said. "It don't make sense that she would leave afoot in a rain like we had last night."

"It is odd," a second voice answered.

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The voice was vaguely familiar. Ferron sat up, afraid, rubbing sleep from his eyes, trying to place the voice.

The rumble of voices in the next room continued.

"A pretty girl, too," Jepson said. "Kind of flashy like, but well spoken an' red-haired."

"How much luggage did she have?"

"Just one of them little canvas bags. You know, the kind you can buy for a couple of dollars in any of the drug stores over to the Falls."

Ferron swung his bare feet to the floor, in mental flight. He'd made some mistake. He'd overlooked something that had made the innkeeper suspicious.

The familiar voice asked, "Did she say how she happened to come here?"

Ferron squeegeed sweat from his bare chest with the side of his hand. The voice was not only familiar. It had the ring of authority. Breathing through his mouth, Ferron padded to the window and cracked the shade. A brightly painted state patrol car was parked next to the ancient Plymouth. He crossed from the window to the connecting door and listened.

"Well, yes, she did," Jepson said. "She told me her boy friend had got fresh so she'd gotten out of his car intendin' to walk back to New York—anyway, to the highway."

"But the highway is twenty miles away, in the other direction."

"I never thought of that," Jepson admitted. "Anyway, that's what she said. I wish now I'd a asked her to pay in advance. I usually do, but her having a piece of baggage an' all, I thought she was good." He added quickly, "Not that I mind the two dollars. It won't make or break me. But it seemed odd to me that she should have snuck away in a rain like we had last night. That's why when I seen your car in front of Bill Hackensacker's store I thought I'd mention it to you."

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"I'm glad you did," the trooper said.

Ferron leaned against the wall next to the door, weak with relief. He hadn't made any mistakes. He hadn't overlooked anything. Despite his protest to the trooper, Jepson was thinking about the two dollars due him for the room. And the state trooper was the same young patrolman who had stopped him for driving so slowly.

There was a metallic click as one of the men in the next room shot the bolt then tried the connecting door.

"Who has the next room?" the trooper asked.

"That's Paul's room," Jepson said. "Paul Parrish. One of my steady guests. That is he has been steady for a week or so but he told me yesterday morning that he is a movin' out to the Wayne farm t'day. That's his intended's father's farm. Paul's usually up an' about long afore now. Can't understand why he's a sleepin' in so late."

The trooper tried the locked door. "Let's go around and talk to him."

Ferron crossed back to the bed and wrapped the top sheet around his loins as hard knuckles rippled across the door. "What's going on?" he asked.

"It's about a girl who was in the next room, Paul," Jepson told him.

Ferron opened his room door, yawning widely. "What girl?"

Jepson explained. "A pretty red-haired girl who hired 203 for the night. She walked out sometime during the night without paying for her room and, what with it being the kind of a night it was, I'm kinda worried about her."

Ferron sat on the edge of his bed, still yawning. "Oh."

The trooper came into the room. "Haven't I seen you before, fellow?"

Ferron started to shake his head then simulated amused recognition. "I'm afraid you have, officer."

The trooper's voice was crisp. "Where?"

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Ferron grinned. "On U.S. 9W, about two weeks ago, just the other side of the Falls. You stopped me for driving so slow, not having a light on my license plate, being minus a rear bumper, and having a burned out taillight. You said my car was a menace to life and property."

The trooper returned his grin. "I make you now. You're the Joe who makes a hundred a week selling Bibles. The one who was saving his money to get married." The trooper raised the drawn shade and looked down at the cars parked in front of the Inn. "I *thought* that Plymouth looked familiar." He turned back to Ferron. "But how come you're stopping here? I thought you were going to get married."

Ferron said ruefully, "I was. Last Sunday."

Jepson added, "But Amy broke her leg."

"Oh," the trooper said. "I see. That's tough." He examined the wet clothes that Ferron had thrown over the back of a chair. "Looks like you were out in that rain last night."

Certain of himself now, Ferron nodded. "I was. And did I get soaked. I was just about to undress and get into bed when that rain came down like a waterfall, or something, and I remembered I hadn't rolled up my car windows."

"I see," the trooper repeated.

Jepson asked, "What time was this, Paul?"

"I didn't look at my watch. But it was an hour or two after I got back from New York. You'd locked up and turned off the downstairs lights."

"Was the front door locked and bolted?"

"It was."

"And you relocked and bolted it after you come back in?"

"I did." Ferron pretended to be puzzled. "But what's this all about?"

Jepson told him. "The girl I rented 203 to." He nodded at the locked door between the two rooms. "Like I told you before, sometime during the night she snuck out without paying her rent."

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The trooper brushed the statement aside. "I'm not particularly interested in that." He looked at Ferron. "Did you see her, fellow?"

Ferron looked dumb. "Did I see who?"

"The girl in the next room."

Ferron shook his head. "No. I didn't see her. I didn't even know the room was rented."

"You hear anything during the night? Voices?"

"No."

"Hmm," the trooper said. "Funny."

Ferron waited for him to continue.

"I'd say," the trooper continued, "from the looks of her bed that she had company during the night." He didn't explain how he'd come to his deduction.

"I sleep pretty sound," Ferron offered.

"You're positive you didn't hear anything?"

"I'm positive." Ferron shrugged. "But then it was raining pretty hard by the time I dropped off to sleep and during the height of the storm I doubt if I could have heard a band playing."

"It was a honey," the trooper said. "I was glad I was doing a day tour. I wouldn't have enjoyed being out in it."

"Nor I," Ferron said truthfully. Now that his first fear was over he was enjoying himself. So the guy was a cop. So? Nine out of ten cops, individually, were stupid.

The trooper shot the bolt on the connecting door and looked into the next room. "Yes, sir. I'd say she had company."

Ferron walked to the door and stood looking at the bed. One half of it, the half where Lydia had lain, was wildly rumpled. That alone could have been expected even if she'd only been there alone—but on the outer half of the bed there was, clearly discernible, an impression of another body, a heavier one, a taller one. Ferron cursed himself silently.

Jepson was shocked. "But I want you to know, officer, that

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I run an orderly inn. I don't allow no fornicatin' nor adultery. An' if I'd a knowed she was that kind of girl I wouldn't have rented her a room."

"Who was she? What did she look like?" Ferron asked.

Jepson repeated the story that he'd told the trooper.

"I see," Ferron said when he'd finished. "How did she sign the register?"

"As Miss Eve Williams of New York."

The trooper pushed his hat back on his head. "Probably a phony name."

"Probably," Ferron agreed with him. "Did she say how she got to the Inn?"

Jepson said, "She *said* some young farmer in a muddy Buick give her a lift this far."

"I see," Ferron said. He continued quietly, his voice filled with self-depreciation. "Well, while I'm not an officer and certainly don't know much about such things, it would seem to me that possibly, mind you I say possibly, it was this same young farmer she entertained in her room, possibly some local man. They could have had an understanding that she would open the door for him after the Inn had closed down for the night."

"That could well be," the trooper nodded. "But it still doesn't explain why she walked out in the middle of a rain storm without paying her bill."

"No," Ferron agreed. "It doesn't. But it's possible—just possible, I repeat—that she may have sinned with this man, this young farmer who gave her a lift, and then persuaded him to drive her back to New York."

Old man Jepson nodded sagely. "I'll bet that's just what happened."

The trooper wasn't impressed. "Could be. How many of the farmers around here drive Buicks?"

"Lots of them," Jepson said. "Got one myself."

"How many *young* farmers?"

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"Young Ira Swinton for one," Ferron said. "And come to think of it the last time I noticed his car it needed washing badly."

The trooper wrote the name Swinton in his notebook. "I know the farm and I'll check on him while I'm here." He looked into the adjoining room again. "The dame must have been good at her business to get anyone to drive her anywhere in a rain like we had last night."

Ferron wanted to say, "She was." Instead he said smugly, "The ways of a woman are strange. And as it says in the good Book, an evil woman is an abomination before the Lord."

"You said it, chum," the trooper said. "Also quite often a lot of fun. Well, sorry we have bothered you."

Ferron smiled thinly. "Not at all."

When the trooper and Jepson had gone he dressed in dry clothes. It had been close, too close. Damn Lydia. Why hadn't she paid her bill? If he'd known that she hadn't paid in advance he'd have left two dollars under the key. Between her and the tight fisted old goat who ran the Inn they might have gotten him into trouble.

Lunch was being served by the time he walked down stairs. Ferron forced himself to eat. He wished now that in his attempt to swing suspicion away from himself he hadn't pointed a finger at young Swinton. The young farmer was certain to have an alibi. What was more young Swinton would be pleased to give the trooper his opinion of him.

When he'd finished with his lunch he went upstairs, packed his bag, paid old man Jepson what he owed, and drove slowly through New Hope toward the road leading out to the Wayne farm.

The state patrol car was gone. He had, Ferron assured himself, nothing to worry about. With Lydia dead, his last link with Les Ferron was gone. The New York police didn't really want to find him. Lydia had said so. Whit had been a

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former New York detective. Ferron knew too much about the kind of business Whit had run.

Amy was sitting on a metal glider on the porch. She lifted her face to be kissed as Ferron climbed the stairs. "I thought you'd never come, sweetheart."

Ferron stooped and kissed her. "I overslept," he explained. "Then there was a little trouble at the Inn, something about some girl who skipped without paying her bill."

Amy laughed. "I'll bet Mr. Jepson was furious."

Ferron sat on the glider beside her. "He was. He even called in the state police."

"For one night's lodging?"

"You know how some people are about money."

Wayne came out on the porch, a wide smile wreathing his face when he saw Ferron's suitcase. "Glad to have you with us, Paul," he enthused. "If it dries up enough, you and I will get at that rye first thing in the morning."

"Yes, sir," Ferron said.

Amy squeezed his hand. "You don't think it's bad luck to postpone a marriage, do you, Paul?"

"Of course not," he assured her.

Wayne paused on his way to the barn. "Kind of got yourself a rest this morning, eh, Paul?"

Ferron amplified what he'd told Amy.

"Funny," the farmer said.

"What's funny, sir?" Ferron asked him.

Wayne told him. "That a girl should turn up missing this morning. I'd swear I heard a car in the lane last night." He looked at Amy. "What's more, you remember that old grindstone I threw out, honey? The one that's been lying in back of the pig sty for years?"

"Yes?"

Wayne shrugged. "It's gone. Missed it the first thing this morning when I went down to slop the pigs." He shook

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his head. "Although why anyone would want to carry away a worn out grindstone is more than I can figure."

"It is odd," Amy agreed.

Wayne continued to shake his head. "Can't see for the life of me why anyone would want to steal it. They could have had it for the asking, an' welcome."

He walked on down the path toward the barn still shaking his head.

Ferron took the handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and patted at the beads of perspiration that had formed on his face. He wondered if he'd ever stop sweating. Who would have thought the old fool would miss the grindstone? Now all that had to happen was for Lydia to pop to the surface.

Somewhere in the leafy green of the huge maple tree which shaded the porch, a robin began to sing. Ferron sat looking at the tranquil surface of the lake as Amy snuggled her small body against his.

"You aren't angry with me, are you, Paul?" she asked him.

Ferron tightened his arm around her. "Of course not."

Amy squeezed his arm. "You're so sweet, so good, Paul."

Ferron considered that. He was neither sweet nor good. Along with being a heel—the perfect heel, Lydia had called him—he was a first class bastard.

For the first time in his life he felt a faint twinge of conscience. He was sorry things had turned out the way they had. He felt like a dog about Lydia.

Still, on the other hand, it was better to be a living dog than a dead lion.

That, too, was in the Book.

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Chapter Fourteen

FROM WHERE FERRON SAT at his desk in the small but warm and well built schoolhouse, the pastoral scene he could see through the partially frosted window looked like a Currier and Ives print, or a winter scene on a cheap postal card.

The boughs of the evergreen fir and pine trees dotting the rolling landscape were heavy with snow. Snow lay, unbroken, a foot thick as far as he could see. The only clear spot was the frozen lake, stamp-sized, in the distance.

He no longer need worry about Lydia's body coming to the surface of the lake, at least not until spring. By spring he would be far away. By spring, he would be sitting with his feet on the rail of a luxury hotel, looking out over the blue waters of Botafogo Bay.

By spring, Amy would be just another girl he'd known, another girl who'd served his lusts for a few nights or a few weeks. The thought saddened him. In the past five months he'd grown very fond of Amy. In a way he was glad her broken leg had taken so long in knitting. It had enabled him to consolidate his gains, make himself even more solid with Wayne, permit the last of the heat to cool off of Les Ferron.

Then, too, he'd never felt better physically. The long hours of hard work on the farm, plus his enforced abstinence from cigarettes and whiskey, had made a new man of him. He'd never known a man could feel so well. He ate like a pig and slept ten hours a night. It all went to prove something. Possibly that a smart man always landed on his feet.

The thought amused him. If there had been any lingering doubt about him in the minds of the farmers living in and

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around New Hope, his acceptance of the appointment to the rural school had been the final straw in his favor.

He was a 'slim' one, a worker. Paul Parrish could do no wrong. Only young Swinton still mistrusted him. Swinton still hoped to marry Amy. He still bore a grudge for having been fingered as the young farmer who had brought the red-haired girl to New Hope. The state police had given him a bad time. Lydia's mysterious disappearance was still one of New Hope's favorite topics of conversation. His fellow church members still looked sideways at Swinton.

The first grade child reading in front of the class read on—

" 'This is a picture of a kitty. A kitty is a small cat. What does the kitty say? The kitty says meow.' "

Ferron resisted an impulse to doze. Life was, he mused, a funny thing. In his case it had swung full circle. It was as if the years hadn't been. It was as if he was still a much younger Paul Parrish, bored with what he was doing, trying to shed the ragged glory robe that had proven to be a hair shirt for his father, and not quite knowing how to go about the business. The business of making money, no matter how.

The child sat down and the girl behind her took her place in front of the class. Their baby voices were almost identical.

" 'This is a picture of a puppy. A puppy is a small dog. What does the puppy say? The puppy says bowwow.' "

Ferron listened absently. This was Friday afternoon. He and Amy were being married on Sunday. In two days his long wait would be over. The broken bone in Amy's leg had finally knitted.

The thought excited him. He was going to enjoy being married to Amy. He'd never known a girl like her. She was genuinely good. In a way it was a shame their marriage was to be of such short duration. Outside of the physical angle, Amy was nice to live with. Now that she was up and around

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again, he couldn't do anything for himself, anything she could do. Her love for him bordered on the sacrilegious. He was her personal god.

Old man Wayne was almost as bad. The papers transferring the lake farm had already been drawn up. All that remained was for the old man to sign the deed.

Ferron snapped his fingers. He should be able to sell the farm like that.

The child standing in front of the class stopped reading and looked at him with worried eyes.

"Go on, honey," Ferron said gently. "I wasn't snapping my fingers at you. I just happened to think of something."

The little girl smiled at him shyly and continued reading aloud from her primer. Ferron looked over his desk at the faces of the children in the schoolroom. This thing was ridiculous. The children liked him as well as their parents did. In the two months he had taught school the absentee rate had dropped to minus zero. They *liked* to come to school. They *liked* their teacher.

The first grade finished reading. Ferron gave them some desk work to do and heard the third grade say their tables. He found himself nodding in approval. They were progressing nicely. In a week or two he would be able to start them on simple multiplication and subtraction, multiplying by one digit, without carrying. Surprisingly, he *liked* to teach. It was fun to work with their little minds.

He was annoyed when the outer door of the schoolhouse opened. Someone stomped snow from his feet in the hall. A moment later, his normally ruddy face red from the cold, his hat in his hand, Homer Wayne looked in the door and said meekly:

"I hate to disturb you, Paul. But I wonder if I might speak to you for a moment?"

Ferron got up from his desk. "Of course." He walked to the rear of the schoolhouse and out into the hall with

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Wayne. It was cold there, away from the hot blast stove in the front of the schoolroom.

Amy's father was embarrassed. "I hate to ask it, Paul. But I wonder if you'd do a favor for me?"

Ferron repeated, "Of course."

Wayne unbuttoned his heavy moleskin fleece-lined jacket. "Well, it's like this," he said. "I aimed to surprise you an' Amy with a new car Sunday. But the dealer over to the Falls jist told me over the phone he won't have a car in his showroom before the end of next week."

Ferron waited for him to continue.

Wayne reached under the heavy sweater he was wearing under the moleskin jacket and took out a folded envelope. "But when I told him what it was, a wedding gift, he called New York City for me and his connection there has a car that I kin have, but only if I pick it up myself. Now he can't drive in and I can't, account of that fool young mare about to foal any minute. So I wondered, Paul, if you'd mind drivin' in after school, mebbe stayin' the night, then drive back t'morrow mornin'? It's a little thing, but I did want to surprise Amy."

A little thing, Ferron thought. The old fool was giving him a new car, then asked if he minded driving it from the showroom. Aloud, he said, "I'll be glad to. But you shouldn't do this, Homer. You're giving me and Amy enough as it is."

The farmer pressed the envelope into his hand. "Now, now, Paul. Let me do what pleasures me. There's the address of the firm and a please-deliver-to-bearer letter. All the financial arrangements have been took care of. So all you'll have to do is get the car."

Ferron put the envelope in his pocket without looking at it. "I'll take off right after school," he promised. He smiled. "What's more, as long as you insist on giving us this new car, I'll drive the old one in and junk it."

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Wayne guffawed. "It's about time. No offense intended, but I don't see how you've put up with that old coffee grinder as long as you have."

"It has its good points," Ferron smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd better get back to my class."

Wayne was apologetic. "Of course. Sorry to interrupt you, Paul. I wouldn't have if I didn't want to surprise Amy. An' don't try to get back t'night. It looks like we're due for more snow. I'll explain to Amy that you had some last minute business to attend to."

"You do that," Ferron said.

He walked back to his desk. The boy reciting his tables had gotten up to his sixes. "An' six times six is thirty-six. An' six times seven is forty. An' six times eight is—"

"Ah, ah, ah," Ferron stopped him. "Let's try six times seven again, Tom. You multiply like that when you grow up and you're going to cost yourself the price of a lot of pigs and chickens."

The classroom rocked with laughter.

Red faced, the boy tried again. "Six times six is thirty-six." He counted on his fingers. "An' six times seven is—is forty-two."

"That's better," Ferron nodded. "But next time let's do it without counting on our fingers, Tom."

The table of sixes droned on. Ferron sat drumming his fingers on his desk, listening absently. Progressive education might be a good thing. He didn't know. But what a child learned by rote he remembered all his life. It got down inside him and stayed.

At three o'clock he dismissed school. He helped the younger children on with their ski pants and overshoes and coats and mufflers, then tidied his desk before leaving for New York. There was the usual loot, three apples, an orange, a cake of maple sugar, and a freshly made mince pie accompanied by a note from the Ora Pages, telling him

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how pleased they were with the progress their Naomi was making since he'd taken over the school.

Ferron put on the shapeless black overcoat he'd bought in Hackensacker's store and carried the pie out to the Plymouth with him.

He was glad of the chance to get away. There would be no Ira following him this time. Tonight he would do what he'd wanted to do the last time he'd been in New York. He'd give the fleshpots a small whirl. After all, it had been a long time since he'd had a drink or a woman, since the night Lydia had 'surprised' him.

The pie was good. He ate three-fourths of it on the way to the Falls and could have eaten more.

It was cold, bitterly so, and dark, by the time he reached the approach to the bridge. The lighted skyline of New York was still beautiful but it somehow failed to thrill him as he had expected it would. The traffic on the bridge made him nervous. There were too many cars. The Express Highway was even worse. He had forgotten what madmen New York drivers were. Ferron drove on doggedly, the steaming Plymouth the object of a continuous blare of horns. It didn't matter what make of car old man Wayne had purchased. Anything was better than the heap that he was driving, even if it did have $127,000 in the Bible-topped carton in its trunk.

The Dew Motor Car Company, the name on the envelope, was on upper Broadway, not far from Columbus Circle. The service manager on the floor looked from the steaming Plymouth to Ferron's shapeless overcoat and wide brimmed black felt hat.

"You've come to the wrong place, haven't you, chum?"

Ferron got out of the car. "I doubt it." He gave the man the letter his father-in-law-to-be had given him. "I've come to pick up a car for Mr. Homer Wayne of New Hope. The arrangements were made through the agency in Palisades Falls."

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The service manager stopped grinning and was properly respectful. "Yes, sir, Mr. Parrish. If you'll just step this way."

He led the way across the floor to a sleek Coupe Deauville.

I might have known, Ferron thought.

When old man Wayne did things, he did them in a big way. When he worked, he worked. When he prayed, he prayed. When he liked, he liked. When he gave a gift, he gave a gift. Ferron rested his fingers on one of the gleaming fenders of the Cadillac. It was going to be nice to drive a big car again, if only for a few weeks.

He superintended the transfer of the paper carton in the back of the Plymouth to the trunk of the new car. There was nothing else in it he wanted.

"And your old car, sir?" the service manager asked.

"Junk it," Ferron told him.

The new car changed his plans slightly. He couldn't check into a flea bag driving a brand new Cadillac. Not in the outfit he was wearing. The doorman would think he had stolen the car and yell copper.

Ferron chose a hotel in the Forties, just off of Eighth Avenue, a combination theatrical hangout and tourist trap. If what he had heard of the hotel in the past was true, the bell captain was both broad minded and able and willing to deliver anything—for a price.

The uniformed doorman was as respectful as the service manager had been, even when he saw the paper carton and despite the ministerial look that Ferron's heavy black coat and low crown hat gave him. A five dollar bill took care of that angle. Besides men who could afford to drive Coupe Deauvilles could afford to be eccentric.

The contagion of respect spread to the bellboy when Ferron tipped him a ten dollar bill with instructions to take the carton up to his room and wait for him.

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"Yes, *sir*," the bell boy said.

There was a liquor store on the corner of Eighth Avenue. Ferron waited his turn beside a uniformed, off duty patrolman. The nearness of the law amused him. All the fat head had to do was reach out a hand to earn a transfer to the detective division. Instead, the officer said earnestly:

"It's cold out t'night, huh?"

"Yes. Quite cold," Ferron agreed.

He bought a fifth of bonded rye and walked back through the cold to the hotel. There was a newsstand in the lobby. Ferron bought a carton of cigarettes, all of the evening papers, and a handful of true crime magazines to while away the time until his company, if company could be arranged for, should arrive.

When he reached the room to which he had been assigned the bellboy was looking curiously at the garish cover of the top Bible in the carton.

"Just like the Gideons, huh?" he asked. "Only bigger."

"That's right," Ferron said. He took off his overcoat and hat. "How's the woman situation? And I don't mean bags. Something young, under twenty, and blonde, without too many miles on her."

The bellboy grinned. "I had you wrong. I took you for a Holy Joe. But as for a woman—" He shook his head. "Uh uh. Since that society call ring broke, the town has gotten so moral a guy can't make a fast buck."

Ferron folded a twenty dollar bill lengthwise. "How about a fast twenty? And say a hundred for the girl. That is, a hundred for all night."

The bellboy weakened. "Well, in that case—" He looked at Ferron sharply. "You ain't one of them vice crusaders or anything like that, are you?" He answered his own question. "No. I see you ain't. You got a racket of some kind."

"That's right," Ferron admitted.

The man took the bill from his fingers. "Okay. It'll take

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me about an hour. But, believe me, mister, the little babe I have in mind is worth waiting for." He described her with his hands.

"I know how women are built," Ferron said. He loosened the knot in his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. "And while you're at it, send up a room service waiter with some set-ups and a menu."

"Yes, *sir*," the bellboy said.

The room was in the front of the hotel, and too hot. Ferron cracked the window a trifle and stood looking down at the swarm of people on the street. Under the blaze of blinking neon, they crawled this way and that through the ankle deep slush the harassed street cleaning department was trying to clear away by steam hosing it down the sewers. Ferron took off his shirt and hung it on the back of a chair. The chumps didn't know they were living. They should see New Hope after a snow, see it as he had seen it from the window of his schoolhouse.

He opened a package of cigarettes and lighted one. The smoke was hot and foul in his mouth. It made him cough. It tasted more like dry cow dung than tobacco. Ferron eyed the burning cigarette suspiciously. Either the taste of cigarettes had changed, or he had. He attempted to rinse the foul taste out of his mouth with a drink of whiskey. The bonded rye, at $7.89 a fifth, tasted even worse than the cigarette.

Ferron was amused. He chuckled. His chuckle became a laugh. The explanation was simple. His taste buds had been deactivated. He'd lived like a cow so long that anything stronger than milk irritated the delicate membranes of his throat and stomach.

He forced himself to take a big drink from the neck of the bottle. There was no resulting glow. The drink lay heavy in his stomach. He thought for a moment it was going to bounce. It didn't. He forced a third drink down his throat.

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He still didn't feel any glow but it tasted more like whiskey should taste.

He lay down on the bed and looked at the lurid covers on the true crime magazines. All of them had two things in common. The only difference was that some were larger than others. He cracked one and tried to read but couldn't concentrate. It was the same old crap. Some guy killed a doll or some doll killed a guy in front of fifty witnesses and the lad handling the typewriter had one hell of a time trying to make the cop or cops who made the pinch appear halfway bright.

The room service waiter arrived with ice and ginger ale and a menu. Ferron ordered a filet mignon, medium rare, whipped potatoes, and a salad. Then, when the man had gone, he lay back on the bed to read the evening papers until either his meal or the babe arrived.

The rye was still doing unpleasant things to his stomach. The cigarette still tasted and smelled like burning cow dung. The smoke got in his eyes and made them smart. Ferron brushed the smoke aside and looked at a small box on the front page of the newspaper he was holding.

> Governor refuses stay for former United States Army Staff Sergeant James Roberts who was convicted early last fall and condemned to die for the brutal murder of Whit Bennett, one time New York City detective. His last hope of executive clemency gone, Roberts will die in the electric chair of Ossining Monday.

Smoke continued to get in Ferron's eyes. He tried to laugh, and couldn't. He tried to tell himself it didn't matter, that it was better it happen to the big sergeant than to him—and made the bathroom just in time. He'd never been so sick. He lost everything he'd eaten since morning, including

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the mince pie that Mrs. Page had baked for him because she was so pleased over Naomi's progress.

When he could, he walked back to the bed and looked at another of the evening papers. It had a brief re-hash of the trial and the conviction. Ferron looked in still a third paper. It merely reported the refusal of executive clemency in much the same vein that the first paper had. So a man was going to die. So?

Ferron read every word about the case in all three papers. None of them mentioned his name, nor did they mention the pretty high brown widow of the condemned man's dead brother.

Ferron wondered how Shirley was taking it. She must know that her brother-in-law hadn't killed Whit. He read and re-read the account of the trial. It seemed incredible that any twelve men in their sane minds could have convicted Roberts on the meager evidence which the State had presented. But there it was in black and white. The big sergeant was to die Monday at the place and in the manner as prescribed by law.

Ferron was still reading the account when the room waiter brought his dinner. When the man had gone, Ferron lifted the silver covers on the dishes and went into a slow burn.

Amy would be ashamed, any housewife in New Hope would be ashamed, to set so sparse a table. The steak wasn't large enough to make a meal for a small child. The whipped potatoes were few and soggy. The salad tasted as if it had been dug out of a swill barrel.

Ferron threw down his fork in disgust, then realized, soberly, that it wasn't the meal; it was himself. The size of filet mignon hadn't changed. He had. He was accustomed to the overloaded tables in New Hope. He *liked* the meals in New Hope. He *liked* the way they lived. He *liked* the peace and quiet and beauty of the country. He *liked* to farm. He

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even liked to teach school. He'd trapped himself by staying in New Hope as long as he had.

An old quotation of his father's, one he hadn't thought of in years, came back to haunt him. It had been the only non-Biblical quotation he'd ever heard the old man repeat. As he remembered, it ran—

'Sow a thought, and you reap an act;
Sow an act, and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit, and you reap a character;
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.'

Ferron snuffed the cigarette he was trying to smoke. It could be the old man had been right after all. So they'd buried him in Potter's Field; he'd kicked off with a smile on his face, rich and secure in his faith.

Ferron got up and paced the hotel room. What did he want out of life? What did any man want? He wanted happiness. And now that he looked back, he saw that during the past five months he had been happier than he had been during any other period of his life.

Why leave it?

Ferron's active mind raced on. Les Ferron was dead. Why resurrect him? If Paul Parrish stayed in New Hope he could be independently wealthy. And not with throw-away money, but with the solid substantial kind that begot even more money.

Amy would be all any man could ask of a woman. She was like her father. When she kept house, she kept house. When she cooked, she cooked. When she sang hymns, she sang hymns. When she went to bed with the man she loved, he'd have no reason for complaint.

A fine film of perspiration beaded Ferron's forehead.

Even thinking of Amy that way excited him more than the actual act ever had. Tomorrow night, then Sunday. And Amy wanted him as badly as he wanted her.

Ferron stopped pacing and looked at his reflection in the

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mirror. So he was a heel. He'd always prided himself on being smart. And he wouldn't be smart if he clipped old man Wayne and ran away from the hottest little piece he'd ever known. And that right after he'd just gotten her nicely broken in. It would be like driving the new Cadillac a hundred miles, then trading it in on a foreign model of dubious vintage and performance.

Why leave New Hope? He was safe in New Hope. He was liked. It was nice to be liked. It was the first time in his life he had ever experienced the sensation. And, with the exception of Ira Swinton, everyone in New Hope liked him.

So he had to do without cigarettes and whiskey. So?

An amused grin spread his lips as Ferron tossed the carton of cigarettes in the waste basket. His grin became a chuckle, then a laugh, as he emptied the fifth of rye into the wash bowl in the bathroom. He'd go home. He'd go home to New Hope tonight. And live happily ever after. His laughter filled the bathroom; then he realized he wasn't alone. A moderately pretty but vapid looking blonde was standing in the doorway of the bathroom watching him with puzzled eyes.

"What's the idea?" she asked him. Her accent was pure Brooklyn. "You crazy or somethin', mister, wastin' good whiskey like that?"

Ferron stopped laughing and looked at her. "Who are you?"

She showed pink gums when she smiled. "I'm Bunny. The bellboy said you were lonely."

"Oh, yes. That," Ferron said. He walked past her out into the bedroom and put on his shirt.

The blonde girl sat on the edge of the bed. "What's the big idea? I thought you wanted company."

Ferron buttoned his shirt and stuffed it into his pants. "I'm sorry, but I've changed my mind."

The girl looked disappointed. "Why?"

"I just happened to think."

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"Think what?"

"That a man about to sit down to pheasant under glass would be a fool to blunt his appetite by eating a ham sandwich." He threw her a twenty dollar bill.

"Well, I like that," the blonde girl said. "I really do. So I'm a ham sandwich, am I? I hope that it rots off you. I really do. I never bin so insulted in my life."

Ferron didn't even hear her. He was slipping into his coat and reaching for the phone to call down for his car to be sent around and a bellboy sent up to the room to get the carton.

He was going home to New Hope tonight. When he got there he'd bury the past. He'd bury it as deep as the dead Roberts and Whit and Lydia were buried. He'd be a good member of the community. In the summer he'd farm. In the winter he would teach school. While he waited for the switchboard girl to answer, he tidied the room by tossing the newspapers and magazines he'd bought into the money-filled carton topped with the large economy-size Bibles.

"I never," Bunny repeated. "I never bin so insulted. A ham sandwich."

Ferron continued to ignore her. From now on he'd be the kind of man he might have been. He might even do something for Shirley. What the hell? He could send her as much as a grand or two and, with what he had clipped Whit for, and what he was going to get from Wayne, he'd still be way out in front.

Chapter Fifteen

DURING THE NIGHT it snowed but Sunday morning dawned clear and cold. The temperature continued to drop. By the time the young filly had foaled and the veterinary had left, it

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was eleven o'clock and the thermometer on the back stoop stood at five degrees above zero.

Ferron studied the scene through the partially frosted window of his unheated bedroom as he dressed for his wedding. Great icicles hung from the eaves. The roofs of the barns and the sheds were spread with a thick layer of snow, like so much icing on a cake. With the exception of the evergreen trees dotting the rolling countryside, the pastel blue of the frozen lake was the only spot of color in a wilderness of white.

He blew on his fingers to warm them. In an hour he'd be married to Amy. In another hour they'd be home, with old man Wayne spending two weeks with one of the neighbors to give the young folks a chance to 'get acquainted.'

Ferron's hands shook as he knotted his tie. It was going to be a pleasure to 'get acquainted' with Amy.

He stood a moment listening to the old house as the roof groaned under its burden of snow. Amy and her father had gone on ahead. He wouldn't see her again until they met in front of the altar. But shortly after that he'd see plenty of her.

He was glad he'd come home when he had. His days of tom-catting were over. Les Ferron was dead, as dead as Lydia. Paul Parrish didn't do such things. Paul Parrish was a proper, respectable family man.

The thought amused Ferron. He laughed, then sobered as he looked at the frozen lake. He would always be conscious of it, be waiting for the ice to melt, wondering if Lydia's body would surface. It would be like living with two women, one alive and amorous, one dead.

He put on the coat of the new blue serge suit he'd purchased. He wished Lydia had stayed in New York. He hadn't wanted to kill her. He hadn't meant to kill her. Lydia had been fun. More, she had loved him.

Ferron shaped his hat to his head and reached his shape-

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less black overcoat from its hook. One thing was for sure. All the old saws about murder will out were so much who-shot-John. He had three lives on his tab. And what had happened to him? He was marrying Amy and financial independence in an hour.

He chuckled at the thought, then laughed.

He was still laughing as he walked down the lane to the barn. The bite of the wind felt good on his freshly shaven cheeks. It was so cold the snow squeaked under his feet. He slid back the big double doors of the barn and studied the sleek black coupe with approval.

" *'Unto every one that hath,'* " he quoted, " *'shall be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.'* "

Ferron backed down the ramp then closed the big double doors carefully. He didn't want the prize cattle in their stanchions—his cattle—or his new colt to catch cold.

He continued to laugh as he drove down the tracks in the snow covered lane. The only thing he didn't like about the deal was the cold, and that could be remedied.

A lot of wealthy farmers went south for the winter. Florida was filled with them. They cluttered the green benches and the beaches of St. Petersburg, they added to the take of Hialeah and Tropical Park, they parked their forty foot de luxe trailers in Bradenton and on the white sands of the Keys.

Ferron made a mental note to talk it over with Amy. Amy and palm trees and blue water. That would be a combination.

"Then you can teach me."

Ferron realized the palms of his hands were wet with sweat. He wiped them on his overcoat. Now that he'd made his choice nothing must go wrong. Nothing could go wrong. He mentally backtracked over the past six months trying to find any loophole in the character of this new person he'd

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become and couldn't find a thing that might possibly trip him now or later.

Whit was the only person who knew he'd hit Bill Roberts too hard. Whit was dead. So Lydia's body did surface. So? No one would connect her with him. If any blame should eventuate, if any finger was pointed, the chances were it would be pointed at young Swinton.

Ferron laughed, then sobered as he thought of the paper carton in the back of the new Cadillac he was driving.

A paper carton was one hell of a place to keep $127,000. It was easy to talk about hiding money, but where? In all the months he'd been in New Hope he hadn't been able to think of any safer place than the carton. True, once the farm had been deeded to him and he was handling its financial transactions he could bank a few thousand now and then—an extra few thousand, that was. A thought occurred to him. He should have thought of it before. The bank in New Hope was small but it had a safety deposit box vault. In the morning he'd get a box, a big one, and transfer the money to the box. As the owner of one of the largest farms in the county it would be only natural he rent a safety deposit box in which to keep his papers and other valuables.

Thinking of papers reminded him of the newspapers and magazines he'd tossed into the paper carton. New Hope didn't believe in newspapers, and some of the magazine covers were just a bit lurid. He shouldn't have brought them back with him. The car he was driving was new. The men at the church would want to examine it thoroughly. And one of the first things a farmer looked at was the trunk compartment of a car, to see how many sacks of seed or fertilizer it would carry. The newspapers and magazines would create a bad impression.

Instead of driving directly to the church, Ferron swung the big car around in back of Hackensacker's store. There was a

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fire scarred oil drum near the truck drop depot in which the storekeeper burned all his papers.

Ferron stopped the car by the drum and, crumpling one of the newspapers so it would catch fire readily, he touched a match to it and dropped the rest of the papers and the magazines on top of it. The quick heat of the paper felt good. He warmed his hands at the fire a moment, then drove on to the church.

There were even more cars than usual. Farmers had come for miles to see him and Amy married.

Old man Jepson, acting in his capacity as deacon, was sitting at a table in the hall counting the morning collection as the congregation sang the closing hymn.

He looked up as Ferron stomped snow from his feet. "Thought you weren't going to make it, Paul," he grinned. "Horse or filly?"

"Horse," Ferron said. He hung his overcoat on a hook and stood in the rear of the church, watching the back of Amy's head as she sang.

Ferron's collar was suddenly too tight. The palms of his hands continued to perspire.

The benediction seemed endless. When it was finished, the congregation sat back in their seats instead of gathering in little groups to talk as they usually did. Old man Wayne glanced around to make certain that Ferron was there; then, smiling proudly, escorted his black-haired daughter down the aisle to where the predicant was waiting. Conscious of the friendly looks following him, Ferron joined Amy and her father. Surreptitiously Amy squeezed his hand.

The touch of her hand was a flame. Ferron perspired even harder. He realized the minister was speaking, but all he heard was a blur of words. He wished the fool would get it over with.

The gaunt-faced minister looked at him. "Paul Parrish," he said firmly, "wilt thou have this woman—" the minister

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stopped there and looked over Ferron's head as voices rose in the rear of the church.

Old man Jepson said distinctly, "Well, I will be damned, I will be."

Ferron turned with the rest of the congregation. The aged innkeeper was looking at something that young Ira Swinton was showing him. As Ferron watched, both men hurried down the aisle toward the pulpit.

Swinton was white-faced with anger. "You!" he shouted, waving his fist at Ferron. "I said right from the first that I didn't like you," he bellowed. "I said you were too good to be true. But would anybody listen to me? No. Oh, no." His voice shook with rage. "You had Amy and her father fooled. You had the others fooled too." Swinton made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "You had everyone fooled but me. But now—now I can prove what I've said right along." He held out the charred object in his hand.

The minister looked at it over his glasses. "What are you talking about, Ira? What have you in your hand?"

Ferron fought down an urge to vomit.

Quivering with indignation, Jepson answered for the younger man. "It's a picture of that red-haired girl who disappeared from my inn last summer." He shook a finger under Ferron's nose. "And this man has made fools of all of us. Why, his right name ain't even Paul Parrish."

Ferron felt Amy's nails dig savagely into his arm. His brain was numb at what was happening.

Jepson was rasping, "His right name is John Gilbert. He's a wine bibber an' a thief an' the police are a searchin' the country for him for the murder of his wife. It says so right there in that magazine Ira is a holdin'."

There was a loud murmur spreading over the congregation. In Ferron's ears it was like a death knell.

Old man Wayne snatched the charred object from Swinton's hand. "Where'd you get this, Ira?"

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"In the trash barrel back of Hackensacker's," the young farmer told him. "I seen Parrish sneak back there an throw somethin' in the trash barrel afore comin' to church. And it just made me kind of curious to find out what a man would be so anxious to burn on the day he was gettin' married. So I put out the fire and looked."

Old man Wayne forgot he was in church and swore softly. He wheeled on Ferron. "Them car tracks in my lane the next morning. The car I thought I heard. An' that missin' grindstone." He looked back at the charred magazine. "His wife, it says here. An' he got rid of her right in my lake."

Amy gave a little shriek and then began to make soft moaning sobs.

A blinding headache blurred Ferron's vision. His knees felt weak. It was an effort for him to stand. The magazine. The goddam magazine.

Wayne's face showed thunder.

Ferron forced himself to speak. "Now wait. Just a minute," he said. "What's all this about?"

"You don't know, eh?" Wayne asked.

"No."

"Your right name isn't John Gilbert?"

"No."

"You didn't strangle your wife to death?"

Ferron wiped the sweat from his face. "Don't be absurd. Of course not."

"You lie," old man Wayne said coldly. He tapped the charred magazine that he was holding. "It says right here that you did an' there are three pictures of you an' her to prove it."

Ferron snatched the magazine from Wayne's hand. The fools. The utter, ignorant fools. They didn't know a thing. They were basing their absurd accusations on the three posed pictures that he and Lydia had made for the Acme Studio on the morning of the day he'd killed Whit. And they

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were posed pictures. It said so in small print right at the bottom of the page—Posed by Professional Models.

Ferron started to point out the small print to Wayne and changed his mind. He wasn't supposed to be a professional model. He was an itinerant Bible salesman. More, he was on record as saying he'd never even seen the red-haired girl.

"Oh, Paul—oh, Paul!" Amy said. She began to sob even harder.

"His name ain't Paul, it's John," her father said.

Ferron wanted to laugh, and couldn't. His laughter stuck in his throat. This was all a hideous mistake. This couldn't be happening to him.

"Someone call the state patrol," Swinton said. He shook his fist in Ferron's face. "Kill your wife an' blame her on me, will you? I ought to do what I threatened to do down there by the bridge that night. I ought to beat in your goddam head an' feed your rotten guts to my hogs."

Someone had snatched the magazine from Ferron and it had passed rapidly from hand to hand. An answering roar from the men in the church echoed young Swinton's threat. Even the minister was nodding.

Ferron searched the faces in the church. They were no longer friendly. They were cold and hard, the faces of men who lived by the moral code as expounded in Exodus 21—

'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.'

Ferron was suddenly afraid. "Now wait. Just a minute," he panted. "I can explain."

Young Swinton slapped him with his open palm. "You can explain away murder? All right. You can sit warm and comfortable explaining it to the state patrol while we break the ice on the lake and drag it."

Ferron realized his chest was laboring with his effort to breathe. He couldn't explain anything to anyone. When the

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state troopers came they would laugh over the pictures in the magazine. But they would stop laughing when Jepson told them that the pictured girl was the same red-haired girl who had disappeared from a room in his inn. They would grow even more sober faced when Wayne told them about the car he thought he had heard in his lane and the missing grindstone. The state patrol would also be curious to know why a man who professed to sell Bibles for a living had worked as a part time model for a true crime magazine. The state patrol would contact the Acme Studio. They would learn he was known there as Les Ferron and the red-haired girl had been Lydia Hart and that she had been questioned and he was wanted for questioning in the Bennett murder.

Ferron edged away from the pulpit toward the door in the front of the church.

"Stop him," Wayne said coldly. He set an example by trying to beat Ferron to the floor of the church with a work-hardened fist. His was the anger of a righteous man. "Misabuse my confidence, would you? Propose to Amy. An' you with your wife's blood still wet on your hands."

Other fists were striking him now. Men were shouting and women were screaming. Ferron fought back desperately. He *had* to get out of the church. He *had* to get out of New Hope before the troopers arrived. He beat in desperate frenzy at the faces blocking his way and fought his way down the aisle to the door. By the time he reached the small hall his coat had been half torn from his body and his face was bleeding from a dozen scratches raked by the nails of the women who were attempting to help their men.

The door was closed. Ferron burst it open with his shoulder and ran out into the knee-deep snow. The men in the church boiled out after him. Instead of following Ferron, young Swinton ran directly to the new Cadillac and took up a defensive position.

"Don't let him get to his car," the farmer shouted.

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His big chest laboring, sobbing for breath, Ferron beat back at the men beating on him. He *had* to get to his car. The money for which he'd murdered Whit was in the trunk. He brushed sweat from his eyes with his forearm. He *had* to get to his car, but he wasn't going to make it. There were too many men between him and the car.

In blind panic, Ferron turned and raced for the nearest car. In his haste to get into the church and stop the wedding, Swinton had left the motor of his Buick running. The exhaust pipe was belching great puffs of steam in the five above zero weather.

Ferron wrenched open the door. A big farmer tried to stop him. Ferron punched him into a snow bank and before any of the other men could stop him slipped the lever on the wheel into 'Drive' and stepped on the accelerator.

The wheels spun madly in the snow, then gripped the ground under it and with a roar of power the big Buick surged forward, skidding and swaying from side to side as Ferron fought to hold it on the secondary road leading to the Falls.

Behind him Ferron heard, or thought he heard, a small voice cry out, "Paul!"

Then the roaring in his ears drowned out all sound but the pounding of his heart as he drove at sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety miles an hour away from the grim-faced men who were racing for their own cars.

Chapter Sixteen

FERRON RAISED HIS EYES from the empty shot glass in front of him and looked through the unwashed windows of the bar at the blackness of the night. It looked cold outside. Ac-

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cording to the weather report in the paper it was going to be even colder. The prediction was that it was going to drop to zero minus.

As Ferron watched, a bearded derelict staggered by the window, sloshing through the rapidly freezing slush on the walk. A Chinese merchant stopped to greet a friend. A cruising prowl car passed.

Ferron attempted to draw his torn suit coat together and, failing, fingered the change in his pocket. He had two quarters and a dime, enough for two more drinks. He felt again for his wallet. It was gone. His left hip pocket hung down like the flap of a suit of heavy underwear. His wallet was back in the churchyard in New Hope, along with the money he'd gotten from Whit, along with the dreams he'd dreamed.

Ferron laid a quarter and a dime on the bar. "Another big John." He added meekly, "If you please."

The barman refilled the oversize shot glass. "You got almost enough, ain't you, fellow?"

"Yes. Almost," Ferron said.

He drank the whiskey at a gulp. It tasted good. So did the cigarette he was smoking. He must have been out of his mind to think that he could change. A man was what he was.

Ferron smoothed the newspaper in front of him. There was more about Jim Roberts. There was even a picture of the big sergeant, in uniform, with all of his campaign and medal ribbons and battle stars showing. The caption read—

His Last Hope Gone Roberts Refuses To Confess. Much Decorated Sergeant Insists He Is Innocent Of The Brutal Murder For Which He Is To Die.

Ferron's bleary eyes blurred the picture. It became a montage of scenes. A pretty colored girl holding a baby in

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her arms was suddenly superimposed on the fading picture of the sergeant. As Ferron watched her, her lips moved.

"Mrs. Roberts," she said simply. "I'm the widow of the man who was killed. And this is his baby."

Ferron was drunkenly amused. It was like watching a life-size TV screen. His smile faded with the colored girl and sweat stood out on his forehead as Lydia looked at him with tear-filled eyes. *"I'm not trying to make you feel like anything, Les," she told him. "I'm just trying to make you understand how much I love you, that nothing matters to me but you."* Her tears continued to flow until they hid her face and her face became a rain dimpled lake. Then the lake faded out and the sun was shining again and Ferron panted hoarsely as he looked up twin white columns at a froth of lace that hid what he wanted to see. Then he saw what he wanted to see, but couldn't do anything about it. Amy was lying on a bed of green lichen with one of the slim white columns crumpled under her. When she spoke there was no anger in her voice, only a great disappointment.

"I think I've broken my leg. How long does it take a bone to heal?"

Ferron tried to keep her on the screen.

"Amy," he called. "Amy."

But Amy was gone and big Jim Roberts was back, as black as the night and as large. *"Beat his goddam brains in."* Then he, too, was gone and all that remained was a picture in a newspaper on a bar.

Ferron fumbled in his pocket and laid his last quarter beside the nickel on the bar. "Let's go again," he panted.

The barman studied him with practiced eyes. "Okay. But this is it, chum. Make it last."

Ferron sipped at the cheap whiskey as if it was something very rare and very precious. It was. The last of anything is rare. His fear dispelled by the whiskey, Ferron's puffed lips split in a grin. So his old man had been right after all. A

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man reaped as he sowed and having sown the wind it was both natural and logical that he should reap the whirlwind.

Ferron knew a sudden need for haste. He didn't like this place. It smelled of rotting wood and faulty plumbing. He was ashamed of his torn clothes and battered face. He wanted to be clean again. He wanted to stay with a woman. He gulped the remainder of his drink and staggered swiftly from the bar out into the black night.

Lydia would protect him. Lydia would make him well and clean again. She loved him.

Ferron saw the car for which he was looking on the far side of the Bowery, parked on the corner of Doyer Street. Ignoring the squeal of brakes and blare of horns, he crossed the broad street to it, opened the door and climbed into the rear seat.

The uniformed driver said, "Hey, what's the idea?"

"My name is Les Ferron," Ferron told him earnestly. He realized he was crying and wiped at his cheeks with the back of one hand. "And if you guys want to be in plainclothes tomorrow, take me straight to the D.A.'s office."

The uniformed officer sitting beside the driver of the prowl car grinned. "Brother, you really got a good one." He reached back and opened the door. "Come on, now. Get out and get going or we'll have to pinch you. We got no time to—" His voice ran down like an unwound clock. He closed the door again. "Hey, what did you say your name was?"

"Ferron. Les Ferron," Ferron said.

The driver turned around in the seat. "The guy we got the flash on yesterday? The guy who stole that Buick and raised all the hell upstate? The guy the state troopers are looking for an account of you murdered some red-haired dame?"

"That's me," Ferron said eagerly. "I also killed Whit Bennett. You know, the guy they're burning Roberts for tonight. I killed him for a hundred and twenty-seven grand but it's back in the churchyard in New Hope."

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The officer beside the driver nodded. "That's where the flash came from."

The driver eased the car away from the curb and swung it in a sharp U turn. "Kick the siren on," he ordered his partner. "It could just be the guy is right. We may be detectives tomorrow."

Ferron sat in the rear of the swaying car smiling slyly to himself. The chumps thought they were smart. They thought they were taking him to the D.A.'s office. They didn't know they were taking him to Lydia.

He'd never been so amused. He chuckled. His chuckle became a laugh. Then his laughter filled the prowl car.

The suckers. They thought they were taking him to the D.A.'s office.

The cop turned around and Ferron continued to grin.

"Only thing is," the cop said, "you got your time of day mixed up."

Ferron laughed. This cop was a jerk, just like all cops. What the hell was he talking about?

"Roberts," the cop went on. "They're not burning him tonight. They took care of that this morning."

Ferron stared at him. Then he tried to laugh again. He tried and tried until he sobbed.

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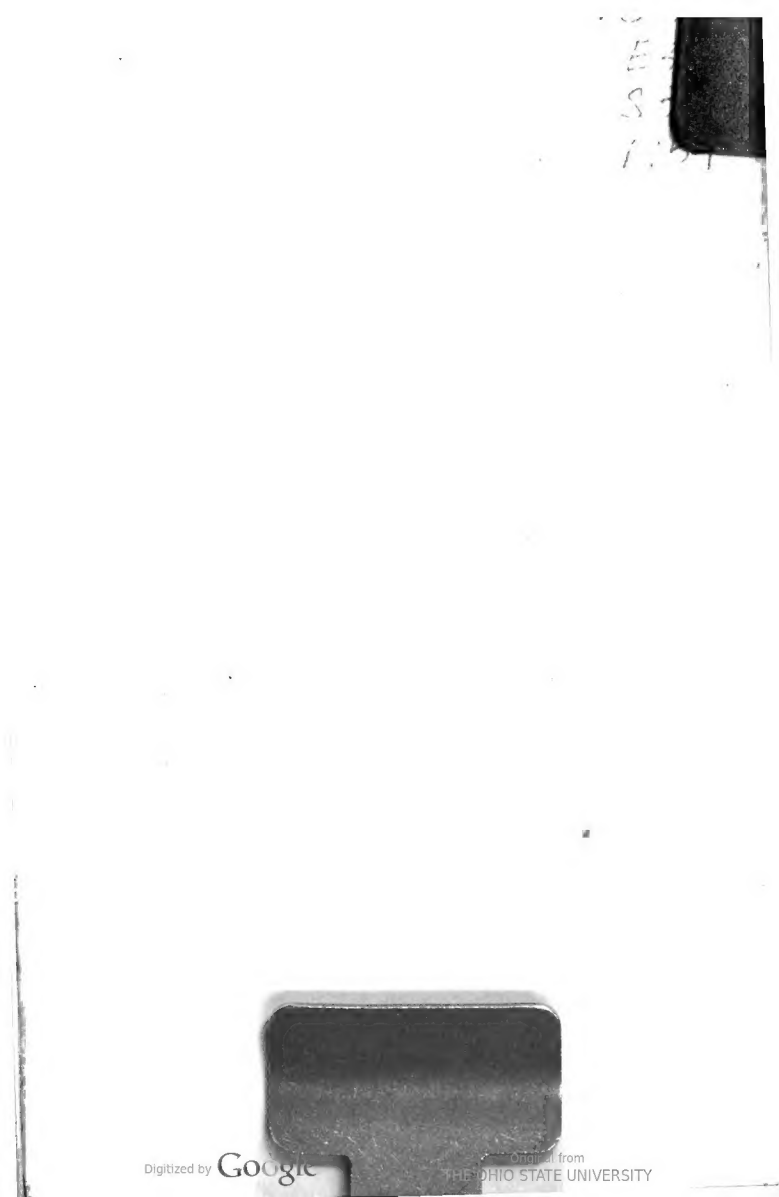
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Lydia, **sullen and sinful . . .**

Whit, **slimy and ruthless . . .**

Amy, **sensuous and virginal . . .**

Jim, **tough and vengeful . . .**

THEY WERE HIS TORMENTORS

They all stood in Ferron's way. That was too bad—*for them.*

Ferron would get rid of them. *But first—first he had to get rid of himself. And carefully, systematically, he began to erase himself from existence.*

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